

The Northern Dawn

A HISTORY OF THE REAWAKENING OF
THE GERMANIC SPIRIT



*From the Twilight of the Gods
to the Sun at Midnight*

STEPHEN EDRED FLOWERS

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**Volume I:
From the Twilight of the Gods to the Sun at Midnight**

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For the Folk, and in memory of Edgar Polomé

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Abbreviations

BCE	Before the Common Era (= “B.C.”)
CE	Common Era (= “A.D.”)
Ger.	German
Go.	Gothic
KJ	Wolfgang Krause’s 1966 edition of the older runic inscriptions
Lat.	Latin
l(l).	line(s)
OE	Old English (= Anglo-Saxon)
OHG	Old High German
ON	Old Norse (= Old Icelandic)
OS	Old Saxon
PGmc.	Proto-Germanic
st(s).	stanza(s)
Swe.	Swedish

The following abbreviations are used in the footnotes for some commonly cited studies and reference works (see bibliography for complete information on these titles):

<i>AeW</i>	<i>Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch</i> by Jan de Vries
<i>AR</i>	<i>Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte</i> by Jan de Vries
<i>B-T</i>	<i>An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary</i> by Bosworth and Toller
<i>C-V</i>	<i>An Icelandic Dictionary</i> by Cleasby and Vigfusson
<i>MGH</i>	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica</i> series

A Note on Dates in the Text

All dates without the notation BCE or CE may be assumed to be of the Common Era (CE)

Asterisked Forms

An asterisk before a word—for example, PGmc. **ansuz*—indicates that it is a reconstructed form. Although such words are unattested, often because they date from a time before the first written records, their existence can be reliably assumed based on the evidence of comparative historical linguistics.

Preface

This is a highly specialized book written for non-specialists. For some, the topic may seem esoteric or mysterious, and yet it concerns the most fundamental aspects of what we call culture. My purpose is to reawaken some vital interest in the roots of our Germanic heritage among the general population of the English-speaking world.

The topic of the present book has been addressed many times over the years in highly specialized texts that narrowly focus on one national or regional culture and on one time period or another. It is my intention to draw these streams together under the natural banner of the common *Germanic* idea. The Germanic cultures are those that spoke a dialect of the Germanic branch of languages (which today includes German, Dutch and Flemish, English, and the Scandinavian languages) and they can lay claim to a greater Germanic national culture approximately a millennium ago. The dispersion of these cultures in the modern era has become so vast that the present study might even be classified under the unfortunate term “multicultural.”

This book is well documented with an array of secondary and primary sources. However, because the work is intended for a non-specialized readership, the depth and breadth of the secondary documentation is kept to a minimum. The major sources are cited, and readers with more specialized interests are directed to the relevant secondary literature for a more detailed bibliography.

The Northern Dawn is a project of the Woodharrow Institute, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the maintenance and promotion of Germanic and Indo-European studies in both academic and non-academic environments.

Stephen Edred Flowers
Woodharrow
14 February 2003

Introduction

. . . und wenn einst der zählende Talisman, das Kreuz, zerbricht, dann rasselt wieder empor die Wildheit der alten Kämpfer, die unsinnige Berserkerwut, wovon die nord-ischen Dichter so viel singen und sagen. Jener Talisman ist morsch, und kommen wird der Tag, wo er kläglich zusammenbricht. Die alten steinernen Götter erheben sich dann wieder aus dem verschollen Schutt, und reiben sich den tausendjährigen Staub aus den Augen, und Thor mit dem Riesenhammer springt endlich empor und zerschlägt die gotischen Dome . . . und wenn ihr es einst krachen hört, wie es noch niemals in der Weltgeschichte gekracht hat, so wißt: der deutsche Donner hat endlich ein Ziel erreicht.¹
—Heinrich Heine, *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland*, 1834

In the northern sky, the realm of the pole, there shines a mysterious light. It is the *aurora borealis*—the northern dawn—which bathes the land of Thule with its darkly glowing luminescence. There is no more fitting symbol than this for the subject of the present book: the reawakening of the Germanic spirit through the ages.

This project comes at a time of need. There is a growing interest among young people in the ancient ways of the north, but establishment academics have lost interest in providing a tradition to meet this demand.

The topic of this work is vast. It covers two thousand years and a complex cultural region that we will now call, as the Romans did two millennia ago, *Germania*. Therefore, all we can hope to do with this study is to outline in broad strokes the heroic attempt of a people to maintain the integrity of their ancestral faith; their quiet and persistent (if often unconscious) ways of holding on to their traditions; and, finally, the slow—sometimes halting, sometimes bloody and tragic—efforts to become once more *who they are*.

Such a work has never been undertaken before. Others have attempted to revive certain cultural features from the ancient Germanic north, and their efforts have been indispensable in compiling this history. However, this study has as one of its mainstays the idea that the *whole* of Germanic culture—English, German, and Scandinavian—must and should be considered in its historical entirety. The lands around the North Sea and Baltic Sea formed a unified economic and cultural region from antiquity. It was only with the rise

of the modern nation that the illusions of superficial divisions between the resulting states emerged. This larger cultural region continued to grow in power, even after its basis for unity—its indigenous traditions—had been significantly disrupted by the introduction of Christianity and the imposition of feudal economics. It would not be overstating the facts to assert that, taken as a whole, this Germanic cultural matrix has come to dominate not only Europe, but the world. This can be illustrated in subtle ways, such as the fact that much of the planet now “celebrates” the Germanic Yuletide (disguised as Christmas) as a key event in the economic cycle of the year. Less subtly, it is significant that a Germanic language, English, has become the new *koiné* of the world.

Because this Germanic cultural matrix has become so important in history, it seems logical to want to explore the deeper underlying patterns that provide it with its identity. This can be done for two different, yet mutually reinforcing, reasons. First and foremost, it is an undertaking of self-discovery. But it will also help us to understand the deep inner conflicts in our culture, which are rooted in incompatibilities between the innate Germanic character of our heritage and certain features of Christian doctrine.

We use history to uncover these tangled and hidden roots. By discovering them, and perhaps considering them *consciously* for the first time as a culture, it is hoped that they can be processed in healthy ways—and will not result in negative or destructive manifestations. Some would say that this is what happened in Germany in the first half of the twentieth century. As I see it, such negative manifestations are not the natural outcomes of Germanic culture *per se*, but rather the inevitable results of prolonged attempts to integrate ultimately incompatible cultural features.

Another reason for compiling this study is to demonstrate to those now engaged in attempts to reawaken the Germanic spirit—some elegantly and intellectually, others perhaps crudely and even brutally—that they are not standing at the beginning of a process that has no history. If nothing else, this work will clearly show the degree to which the work of reawakening, understanding, and re-establishing the essential principles of the Germanic heritage has been an enduring one. Those who now see themselves engaged in this struggle will know what their spiritual forebears have done before them, and thus gain a truer insight into what remains to be done in the work of bringing forth a new Northern Renaissance.

This work should also make clear the basis of the distinction between the Germanic and Celtic cultures—cultures which have often been confused, in ancient as well as in modern times. To complete this picture, however, a companion study chronicling the reawakening of Celtic culture is necessary.

In the present study I follow a specific method of approach so that the lens of understanding is clear to the reader at every stage. Most previous treatments of such topics lacked such a clear lens, and I trust that the clarity it provides will help to illuminate new levels of understanding for the reader.

A study such as this requires careful development, a set of precise definitions, and a clear explanation of the theoretical lens through which data is being observed. This, coupled with a brief history of how myth and religious culture have been viewed by thinkers since the Middle Ages, is the task of the [first chapter](#). In order to determine if a cultural trait is a re-manifestation of a Germanic cultural feature it must first be determined *what* exactly characterized archaic Germanic culture. This is attempted in a cursory fashion in [Chapter Two](#). However, such determinations actually require much further investigation. [Chapter Three](#) outlines the cultural history of the religious conversion of the Germanic peoples on a group-by-group, if not tribe-by-tribe, basis. Some grasp of this history is vital to a true understanding of not only the Middle Ages themselves, but also of the prospects for reawakening patterns that may have been rendered dormant due to the cumulative effects of the aftermath of Christianization. Finally, [Chapter Four](#) details how archaic and autochthonous Germanic paradigms survived—and in some cases thrived—during the Middle Ages.

This first volume of the study is the key to everything that follows, as it contains the theoretical framework used throughout the rest of the volumes and planned supplements.

The second volume will be concerned with the period from the “Enlightenment” to the middle of the nineteenth century, while the third volume will treat the events occurring up until the middle of the twentieth century.

Each and every cultural group has a spiritual heritage that is naturally—or innately—linked to it. This spiritual heritage can be denied or coerced into the unconscious—as, for example, when that culture has had an exotic creed or philosophy imposed upon it. However, the traits deeply etched in the genetic, linguistic, and traditional *codes* of a given culture persistently remain and can never be totally eliminated. In fact, the rediscovery and

reawakening of such submerged cultural features is a key to the revitalization and harmonization of individuals and society. One need only look to the astounding accomplishments of the Renaissance in fifteenth-century Italy to see how this can work. Such awakenings never meet with a friendly reception, however, and so their histories are often ultimately tragic and bloody. This is the story of the enervation of the vital ancient Germanic spirituality during the early medieval period and the phases of its gradual reawakening.

A major thesis of this book is that there is an inexorable link between the *spirits* or minds of individuals and their *bodies*, *languages*, and cultural *traditions*—and that the true mystery of this link is only fully revealed and activated once it is realized *diachronically*—through time, or through a higher dimension of space and time. This thesis is, I am aware, fraught with controversy and overtones of the forbidden. Many are today ready and willing to acknowledge and embrace as good the idea of a “body-mind” connection *synchronically* (i.e., as a description of the present moment in time). However, when this same idea is viewed outside the boundaries of the moment and seen over time, the implications can become for some a great evil. Those who recoil at the notion of themselves projected into a *hyperbody*, free of synchronic restraints, perhaps unconsciously realize the implications of the idea—that we are, as human beings, in the midst of a vast mystery, a vast Unknown. The instinctual reaction of *most* humans to a confrontation with the Unknown is a combination of fear and hatred. With this study, however, I hope to make the theory more transparent, and to guide the reader through a series of its practical ramifications through history.

Beginning with the advent of the establishment of Christianity in northern Europe, a phrase and an attitude began to become prevalent in intellectual life: *ex oriente lux*, “the light comes from the East.” Europeans would interpret this to mean that meaningfulness comes from the outside, or from an exotic source. But the ancient seat of the highest form of spirituality was in the *north* (this was even understood in medieval Christian mysticism). Therefore, those who are interested in penetrating to the deepest mystery of the self and of culture must modify this old formula to *ex septentrionibus lux*—“from the North comes the light.” This is an eternal light that, for all who seek it, heralds the Northern Dawn.

Welch' Licht leuchtet dort?

—The First Norn in the Prelude to *Götterdämmerung*, Richard Wagner, 1876

1. Translation: “. . . and when the subduing talisman, the cross, is finally broken, then the fury of the ancient warriors, the berserker rage of which the Nordic poets sang and spoke so much, will surge up again once more. That old talisman is rotten, and the day will come when it will collapse miserably. The old stone gods will arise from long-forgotten ruins and rub the dust of a thousand years from their eyes, and Thor, with his giant hammer, will at last leap up and smash the Gothic cathedrals. . . . and when you finally hear that crash, it will be like nothing heard before in history, then you will know this: the German thunder has finally achieved its goal.”

Chapter I

Ways of Understanding

Frames of Reference

Before the light of the Northern Dawn can shine forth, a number of things must be understood. Perhaps the greatest misunderstanding which blocks the northern light is the idea that the old traditions were “lost” when the Germanic peoples converted to Christianity, and that what was lost can never be reclaimed. In order to dispel this misunderstanding, a whole theoretical and methodological approach must be delineated. This way of understanding will act as a *lens* through which the reader will then be able to view data critically. It should be noted that the theoretical framework presented in this chapter is applicable to the reawakening of *any* indigenous culture. No “special case” has been created here for the study of the Germanic peoples.

Once a set of complete and precise definitions of certain key concepts—such as “Germanic,” “culture,” “conversion,” and “reawakening”—have been established, we will see how a complex of factors must be present before any such *reawakening* of dormant cultural features is possible. These critical factors are: the *desire* of individuals to reawaken, the condition of *freedom* to realize such a reawakening, the existence of *sources* upon which to base their ideas, and the possession of certain *methods* with which to understand their course in a way that allows for true understanding. When this constellation of elements is in place and the secondary, or established, cultural superstructure is in some fashion weakened—then an older, previously established, cultural superstructure has the opportunity to re-establish itself.

Definitions

Germanic: This study focuses on the reawakening of the *Germanic* culture, so it is necessary to understand precisely what is meant by that term. The designation of Germanic encompasses a group of people who differentiated themselves culturally within the northwestern branch of the greater Indo-European family sometime in the middle of the first millennium BCE. The location of the development of the Germanic people, it is commonly agreed, was in southern Scandinavia and northern Germany. Archaeologists refer to this area as the Jastorf culture. At the time in question, these people shared a common language (Proto-Germanic/Common Germanic) that began to split into three groups of Germanic dialects around 200 CE. This is when we see the development of the East Germanic branch (which later died out, but is primarily preserved in Gothic), North Germanic (the antecedent of the Scandinavian languages), and West (or South) Germanic (the antecedent of German, Dutch, and English). The archaic Germanic culture was for a long time part of a larger Indo-European one from which Celtic also emerged and, even after Germanic and Celtic differentiated themselves, there continued to be close relations between these two groups, as there were between the Germanic peoples and the Balto-Slavic groups to the east and the Italic peoples to the south.¹

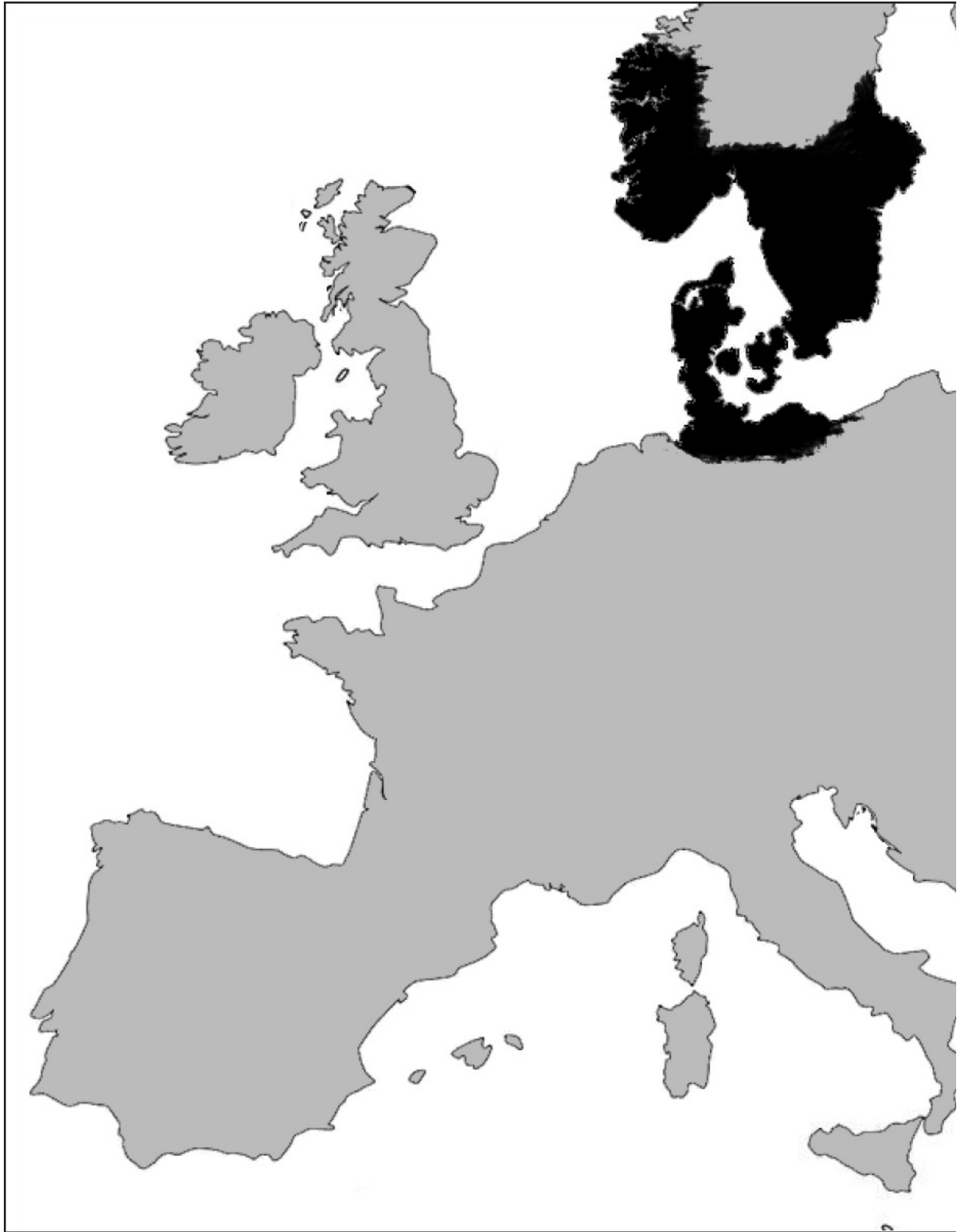


Fig. 1.1: The Region of the Origin of Germanic Culture

For our purposes the term Germanic designates the collective *cultural* features—language, ideology (including “religion” and political structure), material crafts, and ethnicity—of the people who first distinguished themselves within the southern Scandinavian/ northern German region, as well as all of the subsequent cultural developments that derive from that root.

Culture: The key to the question of *culture* is multidimensional. For our purposes it must be considered both synchronically (as a description of a fixed time in development) and diachronically (as a historical phenomenon). To describe a culture completely—be it that of the Germanic peoples under discussion here, or any other culture, no matter how great or how small—four factors, or categories, of culture must be addressed. These are:

1. *Ethnic culture*: the racial or genetic heritage particular to the group in question.
2. *Ethical or ideological culture*: the ideas—religious, economic, political, and so forth—particular to that group.
3. *Material culture*: the objects—from pots to buildings—created by members of the group.
4. *Linguistic culture*: the symbolic codes used by the group to communicate its ideas.

These factors may be conveniently arranged in a constellation or grid.² Each of these cultural factors is also subject to change or influence from outside sources. Such influence can be gradual or sudden, voluntary or coerced.

A cultural group of high internal integrity will tend to possess a unique and distinguishing aspect in each of these four areas. For example, today Japanese culture can be distinguished in all four fields: ethnically, ethically (with its own religion, Shinto), materially (with its own unique style and forms), and linguistically (with its own language and writing system).

For many centuries the Germanic culture enjoyed a high degree of internal integrity with a clearly identifiable language, material features, ideological aspects (e.g., a more or less common pattern of gods and goddesses), and, to some extent, a distinguishable ethnic identity.

This latter factor of ethnic identity is fraught with controversy. Over the past two hundred years the issue of *race* has been a politically and philosophically loaded one. In many cases, rational science has been thwarted or usurped depending on the prevailing biases of the time.³ Increasingly, however, biological science has pointed in the direction—to some extent contrary to the prevailing ideological winds—that biological or genetic factors play a significant role in shaping other features of culture.⁴ A similar situation pertains when it comes to language. Studies indicate that the human brain is physically developing for the first few years of a child’s life, while it is also learning its native language(s). Therefore the brain itself has been *physically* configured under the influence of the unique structural elements of that language or languages.

All of these features manifest certain patterns or paradigms, and ultimately coalesce into an overarching cultural whole.

Conversion: A key event for our study is the phenomenon generally known in theological parlance as *conversion*. It might be popularly assumed that traditional people could be suddenly *converted* to Christianity (either voluntarily or by force) and just as suddenly lose their own indigenous cultural patterns. Of course, this model of understanding is as absurd as it is impossible. In fact, such “conversions” must be viewed as *paradigm shifts*: shifts (gradual or sudden) in the underlying cultural patterns of a given people. From a Christian theological perspective, conversion is one thing (a matter of inner spiritual conviction as a supposed sign of God’s grace), but from a rational, historical perspective it is quite another (a complex, gradual, fragmented process in which cultural paradigms are shifted to a degree significant enough that it might be observed that a given feature has changed from an original identity to a new target identity).

In historical reality this is a process by which the target identity may be the object of considerable (perhaps dominant) change based on the vitality or strength of the original culture. The way in which this process played out in northern Europe (ca. 400–1100 CE) is the subject of James Russell’s outstanding study *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity* (1994).

Reawakening: Once the true nature and scope of the process popularly known as “conversion” is understood as an incomplete shift in deeply ingrained original cultural paradigms, then the actual character of historical movements designed to *re-shift* the patterns becomes more intelligible. The subject of this book is not the *revival* of a dead paradigm (although such a thing might appear to be possible, it is really an exercise in imagination), but rather a whole cultural *reawakening* of dormant or vestigial patterns.

Cultures can be re-transformed—not *back* into an exact replica of what they might have been before, but rather into new paradigms informed by the *myths* (the meta-narratives that illustrate the meaning) of the original culture. For such a cultural reawakening to take place, a complex of factors is necessary. These factors must also in some way reflect the ramifications of the previous shifts, otherwise the attempt is doomed to failure.

The effort to reawaken this atavistic culture on a collective and culture-wide basis is an attempt to return to an organic authenticity, a harmony of self and nature, and, most profoundly (with a nod to Fichte), *to become who we are*.

Elements Necessary to Reawakening

There are certain elements or factors that must be present in a culture, in some kind of combination, before any real renaissance or reawakening is possible. These are:

1. Motivation
2. Freedom
3. Sources
4. Methods

All of these elements must be present in some degree of balance before any success in the effort toward a cultural renewal can reasonably be expected. In the history of peoples attempting to reawaken their cultures to their natural sources of vitality it is often found that these elements are out of balance. For example, motivation might be strong, but this could be hampered by a lack of freedom to pursue the renaissance. Conversely, there might be motivation and freedom, but the sources (texts, archaeological data, etc.) or intellectual resources and methods of understanding the sources are deficient.

Motivation is the desire or volition on the part of an individual or group within a given culture to undertake the work of cultural reawakening. This is, of course, the most essential primary factor. Without it, any study of a culture's vital roots amounts to something akin to sterile antiquarianism. Once a culture's self-determined character has been substantially undermined by imposing upon it a foreign model of understanding (in other words, a foreign paradigm)—be that model religious, political, or economic—then individuals in the transformed culture will find it difficult to become motivated to rediscover essential native models. To a great extent, this is often because they are ignorant of the actual history of their own people. It will be found, however, that despite these psychological conditions there develops in certain individuals a mysterious need, an obscure inspiration, to rediscover their lost or concealed heritage.

Freedom is a condition that allows motivation to find expression and bear fruit. Inexorably linked to the initial volition is the necessary condition of *inner freedom*: an individual must allow himself to feel this mysterious need before he can ever possibly begin to act on it. Any process of spiritual reawakening to vital cultural roots can be stultified by would-be facilitators simply not allowing themselves to feel the inspiration, or if that inspiration is psychologically blocked or fatally modified for them by prevailing social, political, or religious norms. More obviously, however, the necessary liberty is of a more objective sort. At certain moments in history the dominant social, political, or religious structures undergo changes that allow, and in many cases even promote, a breath of freedom that leads to the revival of indigenous cultural material. Prime examples of this are the Italian Renaissance and the American Revolution.

Sources of an objective, concrete kind are necessary in order to effect a reawakening of the sort being described in this study. If a culture's internal integrity has been compromised or destroyed to such an extent that its indigenous ways have essentially been extinguished or submerged so deeply that they cannot be recognized, then it is obviously only through inspired and free passions applied in precise ways (methods) on reliable source-data that a true renaissance can be expected. This source-data may come in the form of written texts (e.g., the Eddas), linguistic remains (e.g., the Old English lexicon), artifacts (e.g., objects, land formations, etc.), and folklore or oral traditions recorded at a later date but which support older models of thought. This type of data must be present in order to act as a basis for cultural renewal. It constitutes the objective "memory bank" that is necessary to inform a reawakening.

Another admittedly controversial aspect to be considered as a possible objective source of cultural structures is genetics.⁵ It is not unlikely that many behavioral or cultural traits thought by positivistic theoreticians to be the product of external stimuli, education, or training are actually the product of organic, genetically determined structures.

Methods are the intellectual resources necessary for the meaningful interpretation of the source-data. These methods are the product of the history of ideas or science. They are conceived, tested against the source-data, and

developed over years of what in the past several centuries has been called scholarship or scientific investigation. Theories of understanding and methods of investigation are constantly being refined and improved. This does not mean that the history of the investigation of things such as mythology is like the history of the investigation of chemistry. The humanities are always extremely susceptible to prejudices—religious, philosophical, or political—and hence to trends that can compromise the intrinsic interest of the source-data.

Motivation, freedom, sources, and methods serve as a useful fourfold framework of understanding in the following chapters of this book. It will be seen that all four must be present, and that each is essential in its own way, for the process of cultural reawakening to occur.

History of the Interpretation of Myth and Religion

When one considers the methods and theories used by scholars and other interpreters of archaic sources of myth and religion, a *historical* understanding must be developed. In order to make use of works created by these interpreters, one must read them with a critical eye. Without knowledge of this history of the field of investigation, or *Forschungsgeschichte*, average “lay” readers might be convinced by the first coherent theory they read—no matter how artificial, strained, or limited that coherence might be.⁶

This story is not only important to contemporary readers, but it also will help put into perspective the approaches to ancient northern myth and religion found in the various epochs and movements discussed throughout this book. For example, to understand why Johan Bure had such a limited view of Germanic religion it is useful to be aware of the intellectual climate of his time, the prevailing theories he had to work with, and the character of the sources that were available to him.

Here I wish to present a brief history of the investigation of religion and myth with a special attention to Germanic evidence. This story generally spans from the Christian Middle Ages, at the time when heathen religion had become thoroughly disestablished, to the current time with its myriad of theories, some of which tend to re-establish a sophisticated understanding of the heathen past. Between Saxo and Dumézil there stands a variety of ideas and theories, many with much good that can be said of them, and a few which have found their way to the ash heap of dead scholarship.

The Middle Ages

After the national and tribal pre-Christian religious systems had been sufficiently suppressed and disenfranchised by internationalist medieval Christendom, there arose a certain interest in the old traditions. A “renaissance” of sorts took place in the early thirteenth century, when we find Saxo Grammaticus writing his *Gesta Danorum* (The History of the Danes, 1220) in Latin as well as Snorri Sturluson composing his *Edda* (1222) in Icelandic. Curiously, both works are based on similar source-material, namely Icelandic poetic texts. It seems that the approximately three hundred years of Christian establishment in Denmark had done considerably more damage to the indigenous lore of Denmark than it had to similar material in Iceland.

As these men were learned individuals of their day, they had been schooled in the literature and culture of classical antiquity that Christendom had carried to the north. Among the rationalistic theories popular in late antiquity, which were even on occasion inadvertently absorbed by Christian culture, is the idea that the old, pre-Christian divinities were extraordinary humans who came to be worshipped as gods. This idea is called *euhemerism* after the Greek philosopher Euhemerus (ca. 300 BCE), who first put the idea forward. The theory that the gods and goddesses of Greek and Roman antiquity were human or quasi-human beings—kings, magicians, or heroes, who, either because of their special accomplishments, or because they themselves demanded it, were worshipped as divinities by later generations—was the “science” of the thirteenth century.

The Danish monk Saxo Grammaticus (ca. 1150–1220) and the Icelandic poet and statesman Snorri Sturluson (1178/9–1241) are sometimes charged with being apologists for Christianity and their works are thus looked upon with suspicion as sources for the study of pre-Christian religion. Both may be products of medieval culture, but that culture was often more imbued with the prestige of classical antiquity than that of the Christian church and its doctrines. This is at the root of the use of the classical rationalistic theory of euhemerism to explain the gods. Both men were *nationalists*—a trend that contradicted the prevailing orthodox internationalism of the Roman church. Both men were also motivated to preserve their national traditions in the face of years of homogenizing church influence.

These underlying similarities aside, however, the motivations and attitudes of Saxo and Snorri are a study in contrasts. Saxo, who significantly wrote in Latin, viewed the gods as trickster wizards who seduced men into worshipping them. Saxo recounts that there were three species of such wizards: giants, “masters of the Delphic art,” and a third type bred from a mingling of the first two (= latter-day human magicians).⁷ Their magic would only be

overcome by the teachings of the universal church. Saxo appears to have altered the stories he reports in order to make the formerly “heroic” figures of mythology (such as Baldr/Balderus) appear villainous, and “villainous” figures (such as Höðr/Hotherus) appear in a good light.⁸ Snorri, who wrote in his native Icelandic, does give a precursory nod to the euhemeristic theory and derives the northern gods from the Trojans. In doing so he is following in the footsteps of Virgil, who connected his city, Rome, to the Trojan Aeneas. After doing this, however, Snorri reports the lore surrounding the northern divinities in good faith, although he may tend on occasion to use rational models to force his source material into neater patterns than might be warranted.

The Renaissance and Modern Periods

The output of such medieval scholars and writers as Saxo and Snorri found relatively little circulation even in their own age. Their works were soon rare and the whole topic of northern pre-Christian tradition and history became increasingly obscure between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. This situation began to change in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which were marked by a growth in humanism that led to the collection and republication of old manuscripts.

Around 1520, the first edition of Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum* was printed. By the middle of the sixteenth century, copies of Snorri’s *Edda* began to resurface, and by the end of that century the first edition of the *Heimskringla*—the collected sagas of medieval Norwegian kings by Snorri—was printed. It was not until 1643, however, that the most important single document for the reawakening of Germanic spirituality, the *Codex Riegius*, or *Elder Edda*, was discovered in Iceland by the bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson. In 1665 the first edition of Snorri’s *Edda* was published with Latin and Danish commentary.

Humanistic scholars still tended to follow the euhemeristic theory that was favored not only by their medieval predecessors, but also by their late-antique intellectual role models. In the north there was little chance for the revival of the pagan gods in the same way that the Greco-Roman gods were revived (or were able to survive)⁹ simply because the sources for the knowledge of these gods were so obscure at this time.

During the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, euhemerism as a favored mode of interpretation only began to be modified as the authority of the received methods of the Middle Ages and antiquity began to be questioned. Paul Henri Mallet, in his *Introduction à l’Histoire de Dannemarc* (1755), posited a kind of partial euhemerism whereby the ancient human kings were thought to have taken on the names of transmundane gods. Peter Frederik Suhm also followed a modified euhemerism in his *Historie af Danmark* (1782–1793) in that he viewed the gods as culture heroes who were able to be reincarnated through several generations.

Clearly, Enlightenment interpreters were increasingly willing to allow a metaphysical component to enter into their views on the pre-Christian divinities. Euhemerism, which had begun as a rationalization in antiquity and continued as a mode of attack on paganism in the medieval period, was finally beginning to give way.

With the advent of Romanticism in Europe in the late 1700s and early 1800s, it was again possible to conceive of the old gods as cosmic entities—and thus, for the first time since the start of the Middle Ages, as full-fledged “competitors” with the Christian idea of the divine. During this period two schools of thought developed that would dominate the interpretive approaches in the centuries to come: (1) an allegorizing nature-interpretation, and (2) a symbolic theory. The former approach holds that myths are allegories for natural phenomena reflected in the human soul, while the latter maintains that myth is a representation of a higher reality expressed through esoteric symbols.

The nature-interpretation was championed by Christian Heyne after 1785. This theory was dear to the Romantics as they saw Nature in and of itself as virtually divine, and sometimes wanted to contrast what they saw as Christian “spiritualism” with pagan “naturalism.” Friedrich Creuzer in his *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker* (1810) pioneered the symbolic theory based on an idea of original monotheism with priests creating a symbolic mythology to teach about its precepts. This mythology, however, later degenerated into polytheism. Heyne and Creuzer, whose theories were mainly based on Greco-Roman models, both believed mythology to be the product of an upper class of priestly individuals.

A methodological breakthrough was made by Jacob Grimm (1785–1863) in his *Deutsche Mythologie* (1835). Grimm incorporated principles of a comparative method to discover underlying patterns in Indo-European mythic and linguistic systems. In this effort he makes use of material from folktales, legends, and so forth. He develops the idea of myth as belonging to the common *Volk* in contrast to the priestly origins postulated by Heyne and Creuzer. Grimm also believed in an original monotheism. This instance of an underlying monotheism seems to be a way of implying that the pagan ancestors possessed a sophisticated view of divinity on a par with that of Judeo-Christianity, but long before the time of Christianization.

In this Romantic period of the nineteenth century, texts began to find their way into publication in vernacular languages. For example, the *Edda* of Snorri Sturluson was translated for the first time into English in 1770, and into

German in 1812.

The rest of the nineteenth century—a period of great theoretical scientific activity—saw further developments in the dichotomy between Nature and symbol that had been posited in the Romantic Age. A characteristic of nineteenth-century thought is the desire to systematize and explain everything according to a single overriding theory. The strength of this approach is that it tends to focus on meaningful aspects (meaningful at least to the adherents of that school of interpretation). Its weakness, however, is that such systematizing is often unwarranted by the evidence collected so that what might be sufficient preliminary hypotheses quickly become all-encompassing theories.

Nature-mythological interpretations began to focus on solar mythology (light *versus* dark), vegetative cycles, and storms and lightning. This school is best represented by Karl Simrock (*Handbuch der deutschen Mythologie*, 1855), Max Müller (*Essay on Comparative Mythology*, 1856), Wilhelm Mannhardt (*Germanische Mythen*, 1858), Adalbert Kuhn (*Die Herabkunft des Feuers und des Göttertranks*, 1859), Viktor Rydberg (*Undersökningar i germanisk mytologi*, 1886–89), and Elard H. Meyer (*Germanische Mythologie*, 1891). In this school, the chief theoretician of which was Max Müller, myth is seen as a “disease of language,” in other words, “the tendency to take poetic metaphor literally.”¹⁰

The chief theoretical opposition to the nature-mythological theory in the nineteenth century was provided by the anthropological school championed by Herbert Spencer (*Principles of Sociology*, 1876), Andrew Lang (*Myth, Ritual and Religion*, 1887), and Edward Tylor (*Primitive Culture*, 1891). This anthropological approach took as its starting point ideas about evolution and what had been learned with regard to so-called primitive peoples and their animistic beliefs. *Animism* is the idea that the whole world, natural or otherwise, is populated with “spirits” which communicate with the mind of man, sometimes through dreams. In general, the theory held that myths were the products of the primitive mind’s attempt to make sense out of the dream-world.

A synthesis of sorts between the nature-mythological and evolutionary-anthropological schools was offered in the monumental work of James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, which began to appear in 1900 and by 1915 had grown to twelve volumes. Frazer combined the evolutionary theory of magic (or “savage” religion) developing into religion, which would yield to science with the nature-mythological explanation of mythology, whereby myths were interpreted for the most part as representations of vegetative cycles.

During the nineteenth century there were also less influential, yet still important, schools of interpretation. A sociological school, exemplified by Johann Jacob Bachofen and also influenced by Darwinian evolutionary thought, held that myth was the product of formerly established social orders such as “matriarchy.” There were also emerging psychological interpretations, such as those of Friedrich Gottlieb Welcker (*Griechische Götterlehre*, 1857) and Léon Marillier (*Mythes, cultes et religion*, 1896), which set the stage for Freud and Jung in the twentieth century. Of great influence in their own time, yet now generally rejected, are the historicizing views of Henry Petersen (*Om Nordboernes Gudedyrkelse og Gudetro i Hedenold*, 1876) and Sophus Bugge (*Studier over de nordiske gude- og heltesagns oprindelse*, 1881–89), who held that northern mythology was almost entirely the product of contact with Christianity.

During the twentieth century some of the aforementioned nineteenth-century trends were further developed and refined, while others, such as the relatively untenable evolutionary ideas and nature-mythological interpretations, were eventually rejected.

Ethnological investigations, such as those of Bronisław Malinowski (*Myth in Primitive Psychology*, 1926) and Paul Radin (*Primitive Man as Philosopher*, 1927), saw myths as real events of the past that had been sacralized and expressed through religion, ritual, and other traditions. There also developed a theory of ritual that construed myth as emerging from the “spoken part of religious rituals.”¹¹ These mythic structures, first codified amongst the cultural intelligentsia (*Obersicht*), became submerged cultural material (*herabgesunkenes Kulturgut*) as the formerly established intelligentsia became historically *disestablished*.

Lucien Lévy-Bruhl’s theory of “primitive thought” (in *Le surnaturel et la nature dans la mentalité primitive*, 1931) held that myth was a product of the pre-logical thought of traditional peoples, while Ernst Cassirer (*Language and Myth*, 1946) sought to understand myth as something which emerged from a non-rational, unconscious inner reality that was primarily conditioned by *language*.

Certainly the two most influential schools of interpretation of European myth and religion in the twentieth century have been the psychological school—chiefly exemplified by Carl Jung and Karl Kerényi—and the structural school of Georges Dumézil. Freudian views of myth emerging from neuroses perceived in dreams, sexual symbolism, and so forth, have lost prestige since they were first expounded in the early twentieth century. The Jungian interpretation sees myth as the expression of archetypes of an inherited “collective unconscious.” Also enjoying ever-increasing prestige has been the structuralist approach of Dumézil, which is restricted to Indo-European evidence.¹²

In an article published in 1974, Edgar Polomé outlined the major approaches to Germanic mythology as comprising: (1) the Vienna School of Anthropology, which holds that myth and religion conform to the levels of development in material culture; (2) the Dumézilian approach; and (3) the topological analysis of myths as representations of archetypes and exemplary paradigms.¹³ This latter school is perhaps best exemplified by Mircea Eliade, who at least partially based his theories on those of Jung and Kerényi.

This relatively extensive outline of the general history of mythic interpretation is initially necessary to understand the limits that might be imposed, and the possibilities that might be offered, by any would-be pioneer in the effort to reawaken the old Germanic mythic and cultural patterns in a given epoch. I will return to this topic periodically in the chapters that follow when certain theories or schools of interpretation of Germanic religion and myth deserve some special commentary or amplification.

Method of This Study

The object of this study is a complex and evolving one. To grasp its full epic sweep and gravity requires an approach which accommodates complexities and historical mutations, while at the same time focusing the reader on the essential unity and continuity of the efforts of the Germanic peoples to reawaken their native traditions. The method of approach outlined here is the reader's guide to the rest of the book. With this approach I attempt to take into account the four elements of motivation, freedom, sources, and methods in the attempted movements of reawakening manifested in various cultural areas—law (politics/economy), literature, religion, language, and material culture—viewed through the prism of the three major sub-groupings of Germanic culture (the German, English, and Scandinavian) as they developed historically. All of the parts of this complex of factors must be kept in mind as we move through the history of what remains an obscure, sometimes virtually unconscious, process.

The elements of motivation and the freedom of individuals to undertake the task of cultural reawakening, as well as the availability of source-data which might be converted into programs for cultural action, have already been outlined. The areas of culture in which we can expect to see such action are manifold, although the reader might imagine that we would have to restrict ourselves to considerations of “religion” or “mythology.” However, as the ancients did not strictly compartmentalize their culture the way we moderns do, such an approach would lead us further away from, rather than closer to, the goal of our study.

When we consider *culture as a whole*, we will note that many areas have provided conscious targets for efforts at cultural reawakening. As we view the history of these efforts, we will see how they have focused on different areas. Frequently, it is on what we would call “politics” today—revivals of ancient Germanic ideas about the law or social organization, verbal tradition (literature), or language itself. Interestingly, the focus will be on what we would recognize as religion or even magic, in other words, symbolic technologies meant to bring the group or individual into harmony with an ideal set forth in a given interpretation of the tradition. But occasionally such efforts can be directed at things as apparently simple and “harmless” as the production of material objects in the Germanic patterns—this includes art objects (paintings, sculptures), crafts, and architecture. At a certain point this will even come to include biological factors. In ancient times *all* of these areas of cultural interest would have been seen as parts of a whole; they were largely indivisible from the cultural totality. From the modern perspective it is the parts that are most conspicuous and the whole that is fuzzy and obscure, whereas to the ancient mind the situation was reversed. This circumstance further indicates why an accurate approach to our study of how ancient indigenous cultural values have been reawakened is so difficult. However, as each historical epoch is discussed, I believe the pieces of this complex puzzle will begin to reveal themselves in the reader's mind.

Further complicating matters is a much larger, external process of fragmentation which history has dealt to our subject, whereas 1,500 years ago we could easily speak of the Germanic folk as a whole (although it was marked by many tribal and clan distinctions, to be sure). Historically, there developed three major and increasingly distinct cultural and geopolitical groupings: the Germans on the European continent, the English (Anglo-Saxons) on the British Isles and their subsequent colonies, and the Scandinavians in the north. This fragmentation did not happen quickly—it developed slowly over a period of over 1,000 years—and was probably not really complete until the beginning of the twentieth century. It might be argued that the fragmentation of the major Germanic cultural spheres is the single most important underlying geopolitical cause of the greatest catastrophes of the twentieth century.¹⁴ In any event, factors of politics, religious history, and economic development mandate that these three major cultural spheres be addressed separately in this book.

As concerns the whole idea of reawakening dormant cultural forces in the Germanic world, certain underlying patterns can be discerned. Knowledge, once it is gained in an atmosphere of freedom, leads to action (and too often *reaction*), which results in understanding. In ideal circumstances this understanding provides a context for further and more refined action. More often than not, however, a cycle of action runs its course in a limited historical arena

—to be forgotten and abandoned until it is picked up by a future generation of cultural revolutionaries who will not let die the basic idea that there is something good and powerful which is inborn and eternal in the Germanic culture.

With a holistic understanding of what a *culture* really is, the method of this book represents an attempt to trace the history of the reawakening of Germanic traditions in various areas and regions. Despite whatever degree of precision and accuracy might be gained with the method just outlined, it should also be realized that certain mysteries will remain. No theory or method can explain everything as it confronts products of the human spirit. That is what culture is primarily: a byproduct of the human psyche (soul), individual and/ or collective, conditioned by biology and structured by language. So much of what is produced by the soul emerges from the depths of unknown and unconscious realms and as a result it often appears that conscious and rational attempts to “explain” it are impotent. The author of this study is aware of this reality, and at the same time considers it his task to push back the horizon of the unknown as much as possible. In this effort it is hoped that the reader, hostile or friendly, will come to understand the source and nature of the power behind the age-old struggle to reawaken the Germanic soul.

1. For a general discussion of this, see Mallory, *In Search of the Indo-Europeans*, 84–87 et passim, and also Polomé, “Who are the Germanic People?”

2. For a more extensive discussion of this grid, see my article “The Idea of Integral Culture.”

3. The topic of race has become especially controversial due to the ideological currents of the mid-twentieth century. However, more objective and unbiased approaches to the biological factors in the development of culture have been undertaken recently, such as Bradd Shore, *Culture in Mind*.

4. For a recent review of various anthropological models as they relate to culture and the organic composition of the human brain, see Shore, *Culture in Mind*, 15–41.

5. This is briefly mentioned by Russell in *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*, 14.

6. The history of scholarship surrounding mythology in general is comprehensively discussed in Vries, *Forschungsgeschichte der Mythologie*, and he surveys the history of the investigation of Germanic religion in *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* (henceforth abbreviated *AR*), I, 50–82. Also recommended in this regard is Edgar Polomé’s 1974 essay “Approaches to Germanic Mythology.” See also Davidson, *The Lost Beliefs of Northern Europe*, 144–59.

7. *Gesta Danorum*, I, 19–20. This is most conveniently translated in Saxo, *The History of the Danes*, I, 21–22.

8. On this question, see Dumézil, “Høtherus et Balderus,” and also Davidson’s commentary in Saxo, *The History of the Danes*, I, 66.

9. See Jean Seznec’s classic study of Italian Renaissance humanism, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods*. This work documents the fact that although the pagan gods had at first been “demonized,” they survived in positive forms as potent and meaningful symbols used in philosophy and art.

10. Davidson, *The Lost Beliefs*, 147.

11. Davidson, *The Lost Beliefs*, 150.

12. Although the theories of Dumézil have not been universally accepted, and even those who accept his theories in general have reservations on many particulars, among scholars there has been a steady increase in the prestige of his ideas over the decades since he first presented them.

13. For a fuller discussion, see Polomé, “Approaches to Germanic Mythology.”

14. An interesting if somewhat historically limited study delineating this now almost forgotten point of view is that of Cox, *Teutonic Unity*.

Chapter II

The Germanic Tradition

Before the question of the reawakening of Germanic cultural values can be meaningfully addressed in subsequent chapters of this book, we must gain a preliminary idea of the nature of these values and establish some definitions concerning them. This is no easy task. The difficulties come from a number of sources: chief among these are a lack of evidence from the oldest period of Germanic cultural unity, and controversies in the evaluation of the various types of surviving evidence. However, there are even deeper issues that inevitably arise as a result of our own contemporary perspective on the object of our study.

Today we are tempted to speak of the nature of our study in “religious” terms—to speak of a “revival of Germanic *religion*.” For reasons outlined in the previous chapter this would lead us away from the true character of the problem. Ancient Germanic culture—like any traditional culture—could not be fragmented into compartments labeled “religion,” “politics,” “economics,” and so on. The origin, or exacerbation, of the fragmentation of culture into these increasingly discreet compartments lies in the rise of Christianity in the Germanic world. How could it have been otherwise? Historically, Christianity represents a religious creed that was introduced from the outside of every cultural group it encountered. This creed, initially separate from culture as a whole, had to establish itself first as a *religion* and institutionally as a *church* within the culture, and then proceed to attempt to bring various traditions in the host culture into line with Christian doctrinal positions. This entire process introduced structural fragmentation where an organic holism had existed previously.

In this chapter I will discuss the extant sources for understanding archaic Germanic tradition and indicate the specific problems of dealing with these sources. Then various archaic cultural features that make up the whole of Germanic culture will be addressed separately. Because this study principally focuses on the reawakening of *ideological* features, I will concentrate on describing features from the archaic culture which will, or can be, used by subsequent historical movements of instauration, or restorations of past ideals after periods of decay. These include essential questions as to the nature of the world, of humanity, and of the divinities—and how all of these elements fit together and interact.

By the end of this chapter the reader should have a good idea of what the essential philosophical characteristics of *archaic* Germanic “heathenry” were (at least insofar as they can be deduced from our contemporary vantage point) and will have developed some sort of critical “lens” through which to view the historical phenomena under discussion. If individuals and groups from the Middle Ages forward could nostalgically long for a Golden Age of pre-Christian culture, it is now our task to identify the character of that “gold.”

Sources of Our Knowledge

How do we know what our ancient Germanic ancestors believed, and how they thought? Ultimately, this is a hermeneutic problem that is better addressed elsewhere.¹ However, for the purposes of this study I will limit myself to objective, observable evidence of a conventional sort. It may be argued from a number of perspectives that we also have access to information which comes to us via less measurable means, such as a Jungian collective (un-)consciousness, “morphic fields,” or other genetically inherited organic patterns.² But such interpretations, as valid as they might be, are too vague and unverifiable to be used at this point. Besides, few of those who have made the effort to reawaken their ancestral patterns have been consciously aware of such ideas.

Let us therefore take a more conservative route: one that encompasses various types of evidence, which in turn must be used rationally and with discrimination. Much of this evidence comes in the form of the written word—*literature* of one kind or another. This is not to be regretted because, of all the kinds of possible evidence, written evidence is the most useful simply because it is the only way the ancestors (or people who “knew” them) can *speak* to us directly.

Sources for the study of Germanic religions per se have been conveniently outlined and discussed by Jan de Vries and others.³ Evidence ranges from the ethnographical, historical, and ecclesiastical works of outside observers of the heathen Germanic world⁴ to the earliest direct evidence from the heathen Germanic peoples themselves in the

form of runic inscriptions and the oldest poems of the *Elder* or *Poetic Edda*. Typically, the “outsiders” literature is written in a non-Germanic language (such as Latin, Greek, or Arabic) while the internal evidence is written in a Germanic dialect—most conspicuously Old Icelandic.

Archeological and art-historical evidence is most important as a corroboration of written sources. If we can find actual runic amulets or boar-helmets in the archeological record, we can be certain that when such things are mentioned in the literature they were not merely “imaginary objects” created by the writer. But an artifact without a written text (or a practical application) that serves to explain it remains mute.

As literature and other verbal and symbolic behaviors of the people moved forward in time, these forms became progressively less informed by the autochthonous, pre-Christian, or “heathen” mind. What might best be referred to as *folklore* is the contemporary, or relatively late, evidence that often appears to have its ultimate roots in local pre-Christian traditions. Such evidence must be used carefully. In principle, it is most useful as a way for corroborating the depth and vigor of patterns already detected at an earlier stage of cultural history.

These sources should not be used indiscriminately and there is a definite ranking that should be made with regard to their weight and importance:

1. Internal Texts
2. External Texts
3. Archaeology
4. Folklore

Regrettable errors can occur if someone tries to project ideas based on folklore back into the most archaic past, or bases a whole system of thought on an otherwise inexplicable archeological artifact.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that *comparative* evidence has proven essential to the unlocking of meaningful underlying patterns in the body of archaic and folkloristic evidence regarding the Germanic traditions. Again, the comparative method must be used with discrimination. Comparisons between patterns of evidence found in two closely related cultures (e.g., the Germanic and the Celtic) carry great weight, while those of two widely disparate cultures (say the Germanic and the Chinese) carry virtually no weight. The proximity of two cultures, or how they relate to one another, is measured in two main ways: (1) genetically, and (2) geographically. For example, in matters of symbolic culture the Germanic culture is genetically related to the other Indo-European cultures. It is not genetically related to the Finno-Ugric cultures, but the close geographical proximity of these two groups over the centuries led to shared features that can be meaningfully compared. The comparative method, as applied to cultural evidence, must be used carefully and systematically, otherwise it ends in a subjective morass of superficial appearances.⁵

Another important kind of evidence, yet one that is difficult to use with discrimination, is pure *linguistic* data such as the etymologies and definitions of specific words. This type of evidence requires attestations of words (*etymons*) in archaic Germanic languages, which may be compared to one another, as well as to genetically related Indo-European evidence, in order to reconstruct more archaic forms of the word. At some point in this process, however, the words must be considered in a meaningful *context*. The vital importance of this kind of evidence hinges on the fact that cultural concepts, as well as objects, are naturally reflected in words used to label or define these concepts and/or objects. By discovering the meanings of the words, we are at the same time reconstructing the archaic conceptual universe. Of all the kinds of evidence discussed here, linguistic data is the one which requires the greatest technical expertise to utilize.⁶

Major stumbling blocks to our precise understanding of archaic Germanic culture are thrown up by one of the oldest and most passionately held *misconceptions* surrounding Germania: that archaic Germanic culture was (1) static or unchanging, and (2) “pure,” that is, free of foreign influence. These assumptions are both historically unfounded. In fact, archaic Germanic culture was neither static nor “pure.”

It is most likely that even the most archaic level of Germanic culture inherited complexities from the Indo-European cultural substratum. Over time, these complexities would continue to change and evolve as the culture spread out from its homeland in north-central Europe. The evolution from an earlier pre-Germanic synthesis to the Germanic culture proper was the beginning of this process, which continued as the culture expanded and increasingly came into contact with non-Germanic cultures. The Germanic people, like the Indo-Europeans as a whole, were well equipped for interacting productively with heterogeneous populations.

The presumption that the archaic Germanics ever consciously rejected anything because it was deemed “un-Germanic” leads to a variety of misinterpretations. That sort of *xenophobic mythology* is more at home in the Middle East than it is on the far northern Indo-European frontier. Foreign influences, as long as they posed no obvious challenge to basic Germanic cultural values, were probably viewed as opportunities for gaining various

sorts of advantage. Also, as there was no national consciousness of being *Germanic* as such, influences from outside were most likely to be dealt with at the tribal or even clanic level.

The non-Germanic cultures that had an archaic and in some cases ongoing effect on the Germanic world were the contiguous Indo-European cultures: the Celtic, Italic, northern Iranian, and Slavic, as well as the neighboring, but non-Indo-European, Finno-Ugric peoples. The Celts maintained the oldest connections with the Germanic peoples, dating back to the very origins of the latter and continuing in a dynamic fashion up until the Middle Ages. Through trade and war, the Germanic peoples interacted with the Italic, and perhaps Etruscan, peoples from a prehistoric time. In some ways the coming of Christianity is as much a *Roman* influence as anything else. The North Iranian steppe peoples, first the Scythians (700–300 BCE) and then the related Sarmatians (300 BCE– 200 CE), productively interacted with the eastwardly migrating Germanic culture around the Black Sea.⁷ Ongoing contact was also likely with the Slavs from an early period, and a similar situation would have been present with the Finno-Ugric peoples in the northeast. In the cultural (economic, political, and military) interactions between the Germanic world and each of these other cultures we can safely assume that information that affected the religious or ideological framework of the Germanic tribes was also exchanged. Most of these exchanges were, however, prehistoric and are only reflected in things such as the archaeological or linguistic records.

In historical times, we can trace interactions with the Roman Empire in the form of trade, or the increasing Germanization of the imperial army, or the influence of Roman cults such as Mithraism. It is not unlikely that at first Christianity itself was thought of as just another of these Roman cults with which the Germanic peoples had historically interacted in a productive way. This is one of the underlying reasons as to why the idea of “conversion” to Christianity in fact sets up a false dichotomy of Christian/ pagan.

Considering all of the mutual influence that was exerted between Germanic and neighboring foreign cultures, it therefore remains an important task to determine as clearly as possible what the truly Germanic cultural traits or values were.

Major Germanic Cultural Traits

Each cultural trait discussed here forms parts of an interlocking whole. Here we view them analytically as a step toward understanding that dynamic whole. The dynamism of this body of material lies in the fact that our evidence for these characteristics comes from disparate areas within archaic Germanic culture over a time span of more than a thousand years. Therefore, in this survey of archaic Germanic cultural traits, I will focus on the most conspicuous aspects that tended to play a role in the various historical attempts to reawaken or stimulate these cultural features.

The determination of *what is Germanic* is sometimes made difficult by the historical fact that much of archaic Germanic culture was virtually identical with a certain stage of the more general Indo-European culture. Hence, when Tacitus extols the “noble savagery” of the Germanic tribes he is, in a sense, lamenting (both consciously and unconsciously) what he sees as the decayed original vigor and virtue of his own Latin culture. Clearly, however, the Germanic culture is bound to specific attested myths, artifacts, and linguistic features, whereas the Indo-European background often hovers in the realm of abstract reconstructions. In general, our “litmus test” remains that only those who in some conscious fashion view their efforts as a “revival” or re-establishment of “lost” Germanic cultural values can be considered as full participants in the Northern Dawn.

Another difficulty arises in distinguishing Christian spirituality from medieval Germanic culture simply because Christian values had first already been heavily Indo-Europeanized in the West through syncretism with Hellenic, Roman, and Celtic cultures—and Gothicized in the early Arian movement—long before Christianity ever systematically encountered southern and northern Germanic culture. It may therefore come as something of a surprise to find that the storied clash between pagan and Christian cultures may not have been as prevalent or dramatic as is usually assumed. As James Russell has shown, it was often Germanic culture that was more influential over Christian ways, rather than the reverse.⁸ The stark pagan/ Christian dichotomy may not have been all that intense in various early phases of the Christianization process—especially when viewed from the perspective of those not formally educated in theology, be they kings or peasants. But remembrances of the most intense aspects of this cultural clash certainly did develop into a mythic paradigm and hence shaped literary conventions—all of which affected the attitudes and conventional models of understanding, especially from the eighteenth-century Romantic period forward.



Fig. 2.1: Inter-Cultural Relationships and Interactions

Individual cultural traits or categories discussed here will also continue to serve as matrices for the discussion of the possible reawakening of these traits throughout the historical portions of this study. The categories are: *anthropology* (the understanding of what the human being is), *kinship* (how humans relate to each other genetically), *theology* (the understanding of who and what the gods and goddesses are), *mythology* (what the meta-narratives concerning the divinities entail or signify), *cosmology* (the understanding of the greater world in which humans and gods exist), *customs* (various practices, beliefs, and laws), and *aesthetics* (the idea of what constitutes the beautiful). For some time periods we are well informed about these things, but for other periods the information is much more sparse. In practice, the most conspicuous areas of revitalization are found in the fields of *law* (or politics), *literature*, *religion*, *language*, and *material culture* (graphic or plastic arts and architecture). Once some understanding is gained regarding particular Germanic views in these areas of life, meaningful discussions of the legitimate reawakening of these traits can be undertaken.

Germanic Anthropology

An *anthropology* of a given culture encompasses that culture's answer to the question: "What is a human being?" This can only be addressed in broad terms. By focusing on the issue of the human being, answers to further cultural questions can be given more substance. What is remarkable about archaic Germanic anthropology is its explicit linkage between gods and humans and its multivalent structure. Humans are spiritually (and, implicitly, physically) descended from the gods and individuals are actually composite beings made up of a number of interlocking structures (i.e., souls/bodies). This is quite different from the Judeo-Christian idea of a *contractual*—rather than *organic* or *genetic*—relationship with divinity and the relatively simplistic anthropology consisting of body/soul/spirit.

In the Germanic anthropogony, or origin of humanity, a complex process is delineated. Our sources for this are principally the Eddas (*Völuspá*, 17–18; *Rígspula*; and *Gylfaginning*, chap. 9), although comparative linguistic evidence also supports these sources. What emerges from these texts is the idea that humanity evolved on an organic basis to a certain pre-human level. The first humans, Askr and Embla, are said to be *plants*, or in other words, vegetative beings. The gods of consciousness—Wōðanaz-Wiljōn-Wihaz—then *endow* proto-humanity with spiritual gifts. This act of infusion of divine qualities, limited though it might be, is in effect the moment of the "creation" of humanity. However, beyond this there is the myth of how various *kinds* of men were engendered. This is recounted in the *Rígspula*, where we read of how Rígr (= Heimdallr/Óðinn) engendered three types of men: Þræll (servant peasant), Karl (yeoman farmer), and Jarl (the noble warrior). In essence, this reflects the idea that humans are both spiritual and material beings, without an indication that there might be anything "evil" about the organic part. But the divine, or spiritual, qualities are obviously viewed as qualitatively superior. Additionally, there is clearly an ideology of hierarchy based on genetic heritage. There are different kinds of men, unlike and unequal in their natures.

The anthropology itself is a description of the nature of an individual human being as a complete living entity. Our sources for this in the Germanic tradition are myriad. The ancient languages abound in a special technical vocabulary for parts of the human being.⁹ What emerges here is that there is no absolute distinction between what we call the physical and the psychic forms of existence. It is rather more like a spectrum of up to nine bands with material physicality somewhere near one extreme and spiritual abstraction at the other. There is no strict body/ soul dichotomy.

A further indication of the degree to which the physical and non-physical parts of the human being were interwoven is revealed in the doctrine of rebirth, or "metempsychosis." It was believed that newborn children were in fact their own dead ancestors reborn.¹⁰ There is an emphasis on the unity of the family—in bonds over which death has no power. It was the greatest blessing and joy to be reborn in Midgard.

Of course, there is no trace of the pernicious doctrine of the "forgiveness of sins." In the sometimes apparently "fatalistic" Germanic philosophy, the less-than-virtuous actions of an individual were thought to have their consequences not only in that life, but also perhaps in lives to come. This is really what is behind the Germanic idea of "fate" or destiny. In Old Norse this is *ørlög*, in Old High German *wurd*, and in Old English *wyrd*. Each of these words implies that something which has been done, actions that have been "laid down" in the *past*, will inevitably shape events in the here-and-now. This idea focuses the human being on living a life of full responsibility in perfect freedom. Adherence to certain virtues—among them courage, truth-telling, honor, loyalty, self-discipline, hospitality, hard work, self-reliance, and perseverance—is essential for the continued happiness of the individual and for the well-being of society as a whole.

Kinship

Of all the virtues perhaps *loyalty*—*troth*—is the most essential. It is this virtue that holds the bonds of kinship together. Loyalty was not given indiscriminately. One's first loyalty would be to one's own immediate family, most especially to one's parents and to one's spouse. Beyond this there were clanic and tribal loyalties. Allegiance to the clanic or tribal chieftain was of tremendous importance. The idea of a greater Germanic *nation* (made up of all the Germanic-speaking peoples who worshipped the Germanic gods) was of relatively little importance because it was too distant and perhaps antithetical to tribal or clanic interests. These loyalties were based on clear blood-ties.

Another important bond of loyalty was exercised by voluntary oaths of allegiance to the lord of a retinue or *comitatus*. Lords of this kind could draw men from various clans and tribes to serve with them. They could protect certain geographical regions or make raids into others for profit and glory. The loyalty of the retainers to their lords was often such that it would be considered a disgrace to survive one's lord in battle. This particular institution was of tremendous influence in the shaping of secular culture in the Middle Ages.¹¹

Whether one's bonds with one's fellow human beings were of a genetic nature or based upon the swearing of a solemn oath, these bonds of inter-human solidarity were sacrosanct in character. It might even be said that the virtue of loyalty to the group, and solidarity with it, was paramount in ancient Germanic culture.¹²

Germanic Theology

This bond of loyalty—*troth*—is also the chief thing that characterizes the ancient Germanic person's relationship with his or her gods and/ or goddesses. This should come as no surprise, as the organic relationship posited between the divinities and humans clearly implies a parallel between how one relates to the clan and ancestors and how one might relate to the divinities. Loyalty to one's family and clan leads to loyalty to one's ancestors—and our ultimate ancestors are divine.

As compared to most other genetically related Indo-European mythologies, the Germanic system yields one overriding peculiarity. From an early time, if not from the beginning, the Germanic god *Wōðanaz* (ON Óðinn, OE Wōden, OHG Wuotan, etc.)—who corresponds to classical Mercurius/Hermēs—holds the preeminent position in the pantheon. In other Indo-European cultures, this position is held by Jupiter/Zeus and the cognate deities (which in the Germanic pantheon would be Teiwaz [ON Týr, OE Tiw, OHG Ziu]). Whether the prominence of Woden was original, or a later historical development as some believe,¹³ it does appear as a distinctive feature of every historically well-attested Germanic theology.

The whole structure of the Germanic pantheon has been most insightfully discussed by the French philologist Georges Dumézil.¹⁴ Some remain skeptical about Dumézil's theories as they relate to all Indo-European cultures. One of the main criticisms leveled against his system is that it appears to be based primarily on Germanic and Indo-Iranian evidence. That is to say, it fits best for these cultural groups. For our purposes here, therefore, we can use Dumézil's structure to provide a basic understanding of how the main Germanic deities related to each other.

Dumézil posited a *tripartite* system of powers, which were mutually reflected in human and divine "society." The first function expressed sovereign power; the second function, physical power; and the third function, productive and reproductive power. The first function was further divided into two subtypes: the juridical-rational and the mantic-magical, represented in society as the judge-king and the priest-magician, respectively. Among the Germanic gods these two types are reflected by Týr and Óðinn, in that order.¹⁵ A graphic representation of these functions appears in [Figure 2.2](#). This original—and likely Indo-European—tripartition of the society of humans and gods is a deep-set structure in archaic Germanic culture. It seems to be reflected in the mythic *Rígsþula* account of the origins of human types outlined above.

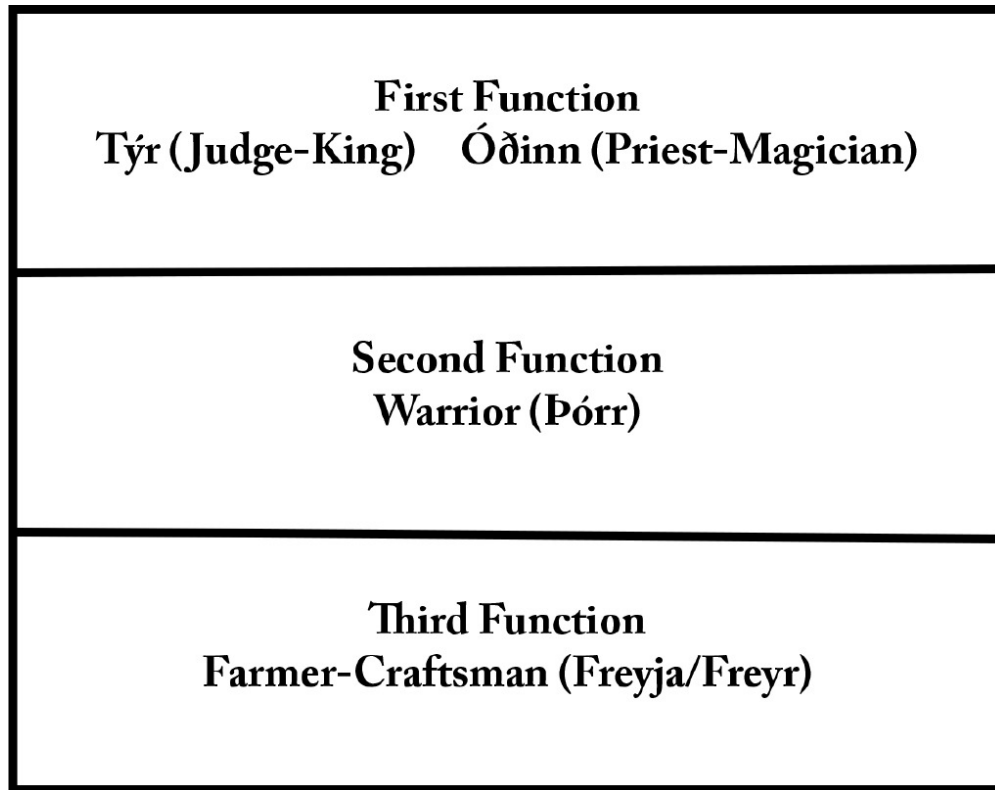


Fig. 2.2: The Tripartite Structure of the Germanic Pantheon

The ancient Germanic deities were not conceived of as perfect or immortal. This is because they—like all gods and goddesses of antiquity who were provided with anthropomorphic characteristics (and this includes the Judeo-Christian Jehovah)—were only *relatively* more perfect and more permanent (immortal) than humans. This relativity may refer back to the fact that both divinities and humans were thought to be genetically related. Wōðanaz is the god *of* inspiration, but not really inspiration (*wōðaz*) itself; Freyja is the goddess *of* love, but not love itself. The divinities are seen to struggle *directly with* abstract ideas—such as inspiration, wisdom, insight, justice, truth, strength, love, beauty, and so forth—in ways that seem super-human. Ordinary humans had to communicate with deities through certain rites in order to obtain contact with these higher principles. This concept is illustrated in [Figure 2.3](#).

Apparently, among the worshippers of Óðinn there was a growing philosophical impulse, a direct approach of humans toward ideas and principles without the necessary intervention or mediation of divinities. This is parallel to the path blazed earlier in other Indo-European cultures in Greece and India. It might also be noted that this attitude colors much of our best evidence for Germanic paganism since this was the increasing stance of the poets and wordsmiths (whose god was usually Óðinn) who composed and recorded mythic material in the twilight of original heathenry.

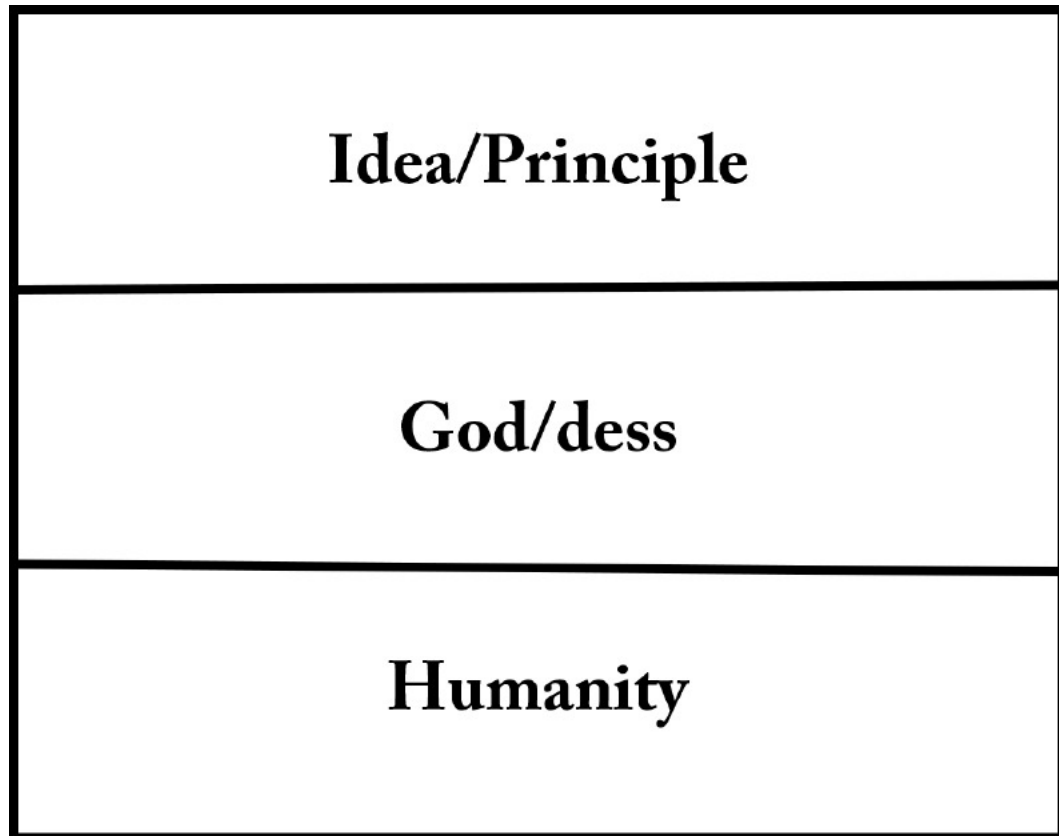


Fig. 2.3: Relationship of Humans, Divinities, and Ideas

Germanic Mythology

Mythology is the meta-narrative that explains, and gives meaning to, the most important aspects of a culture. No culture is without a mythology. It is as much by the common theology and mythology of the Germanic peoples as by their common linguistic characteristics that we are able to recognize them in history. Our sources for Germanic mythology—actual textual meta-narratives, or “stories,” about the activities and interactions of the gods and goddesses—are abundant and rich in records from Iceland, but relatively sparse elsewhere in Germania. The question of sources is dealt with in [Chapter One](#), and will be a continuing matter of discussion throughout this book.

At this juncture what is important to examine are the prominent patterns in Germanic mythology. The divinities that most often figure in the mythology are Óðinn, Þórr, and Freyja. Myths of Óðinn focus on his role as a creator god, a seeker of wisdom and knowledge, patron of kings and heroes, seducer of women (mortal and divine), and a strategist in the cosmic war against the giants. Myths of Þórr emphasize his function as a fighter for the gods against the giants and his interest in maintaining his weaponry (such as his hammer, Mjöllnir). Although we can assume that many of the myths of Freyja did not survive, several important themes in myths surrounding her give us a good idea of her function. The myths of Freyja focus on her role as a seeker of riches and power (as well as inspiration). A dozen or more other important mythic themes focus on one divinity or another. Among these are Týr’s self-sacrifice to save the gods from the ravages of Fenrir; Freyr’s love affair with Gerð; Iðunn’s preservation of the life-sustaining apples; the sea-giant Ægir’s feast-hosting and cauldron; Baldr’s death and funeral, Njörðr’s unhappy marriage to Skaði; the eschatology of *ragnarök*; and the vengeance of Víðarr and Váli, which restores the world.

In addition to mythology relating to deities, the Germanic tradition is also rich in heroic legend and saga. Some heroes, such as Sigurðr, appear to be almost demi-gods who lived *in illo tempore* (that is, in mythic time), while others seem entirely all-too-human, such as Egill Skallagrímsson. In the case of the former, the *Völsunga Saga* provides the richest context for Norse heroic mythology. This material constitutes the national epic of both the Scandinavians and the Germans. The German version is contained in the *Nibelungenlied*. The core of this heroic narrative is the story of Sigurðr, the dragon-slayer. Sigurðr is a posthumous son, who inherits heroic powers from his

father Sigmundr, whom he first avenges before slaying the dragon Fáfnir—thus gaining the treasure the worm was hoarding. He then awakens the Óðinnic *valkyrja* on a fire-ringed mountain, whom he marries as she reveals to him the runes of secret knowledge. Later he is duped into forgetting his heroic accomplishments and relationships, and is eventually killed by treachery. This Nibelung/Völsung material has proven to be the most enduring and widespread of all Germanic mythic paradigms.

As a general trait it is noteworthy that the Germanic hero must undergo lifetimes of development in Miðgarðr—in the trials and tribulations of this world—before attaining his quasi-divine stature. This is in marked contrast to other Indo-European heroic mythologies, where we see that the sons of Zeus or Lugh are at their full power in the first generation and deteriorate from there.

Myth, whether divine or heroic, acts as a theoretical outline of the vital paradigms of a culture. The revalorizing and reawakening of these paradigms throughout history will provide a major indication for the renewal of the spirit of the culture which first recorded them.

Germanic Cosmology

Among the archaic paradigms, perhaps it is a culture's cosmology—the way in which it sees how the world is put together—that is the single most important. Traditional cosmologies answer subtle questions about the underlying assumptions common in a given culture. One of the most important things to realize about archaic Germanic cosmology is that it is what James Russell calls a “world-accepting” one.¹⁶ This is typical of archaic folk religions. They think the world is a good place and want to maintain its goodness, while also trying to increase that goodness or improve it in some way. World-rejecting religions tend to see the world we live in as bad, or “fallen.” The Germanic view of the world, the context in which humanity lives, is that it is good, but doomed to destruction by the blind forces of non-consciousness. In this pessimistic view is revealed the depth of Germanic philosophical realism—even at this archaic stage.

Our sources for Germanic cosmology are rich. The Eddas contain complex references to the origin, structure, and demise of the cosmic order. These include the *Völuspá* and the *Grímnismál* in the *Poetic Edda* and the *Gylfaginning* in the *Prose Edda* of Snorri Sturluson. Many of these references are corroborated by linguistic data found in other Germanic languages.

The cosmogony, or narrative about how the world originated, is an elegant one. A proto-cosmic order coalesces out of *ginnunga-gap*, the “magically charged void.”¹⁷ Various beings evolve into ever more complex forms, through many generations, until finally the first true gods come into existence. These are Wōðanaz, Wīljōn, and Wīhaz (ON Óðinn, Vili, and Vé)—or, as their names might be interpreted: “(Master of-)Inspiration,” “Strong-Will,” and “Sacrality.” These “brothers” rebel against the then-current order and sacrifice the proto-cosmic man, Ymir, and from the parts of his body fashion a new, more rational universe. In this archaic myth—which is a reflection of archaic Indo-European patterns¹⁸—it is clear that for the Germanic mind, consciousness is divine, and it is a rare factor in the universe which developed or evolved by means of progressive re-combinations of “elements” through cyclical (re-)generations. The order in which we live is founded on a necessary cosmic “crime”—the slaying of a kinsman by Óðinn. As no crime can occur without repercussions, the doom of the cosmos is sealed by its very act of creation.

The world-order is envisioned as a *tree*. The trunk of the tree is a column, an *axis mundi*, which separates heaven from earth, and the earth from the underworld (Hel). The rational re-ordering (= creation) of the cosmos by Óðinn involves the articulation of reality into nine worlds, or levels, or types of being. Of overriding importance is the idea that the realm of the high-gods is *above* man and the world in which humanity lives, and that humanity's world is seen in the *middle* of the whole cosmic order. This idea is linguistically attested throughout the Germanic languages: ON Miðgarðr, OE Middangeard, OHG Mittgart, Go. Midjungards. The fact that the expression is found in Gothic shows just how archaic the concept of the world of men being located in the middle of the spiritual, cosmic order was. The realm directly above humans in Ljóssálfheimr is filled with ancestral spirits, *álfar* (elves), while Svartálfheimr, just below us, is inhabited by dwarves, or *dökkálfar* (dark-elves). There is therefore the implication of a *vertical* axis of symbolic or spiritual reality, which connects the ancestral sovereign gods (Æsir) in Ásgarðr through the ancestral spirits (*álfar*) to humans (in Miðgarðr), down to the dwarves and then to the spirits of the dead in Hel. Around the midpoint on a horizontal plane are four outer worlds: Vanaheimr (in the west), Jötunheimr (in the east), Niflheimr (in the north), and Muspellsheimr (in the south). Again Miðgarðr forms the midpoint among these four worlds, as shown in [Figure 2.4](#). The Vanir (in Vanaheimr) are archaic divinities of fertility, sexuality, wealth, and well-being—Dumézil's third function. The *jötnar* are giants who inhabit the natural world. Muspellsheimr is a realm of fire, while Niflheimr forms its polar opposite as a realm of cold. The entire cosmic order is a reiteration of a pattern of juxtaposed opposites woven into a complex whole that is rife with ambiguities. In this regard, the ancient

Germanic mythologists were perhaps more akin to modern philosophers than the often-simplistic medieval cosmologists whom they later encountered.

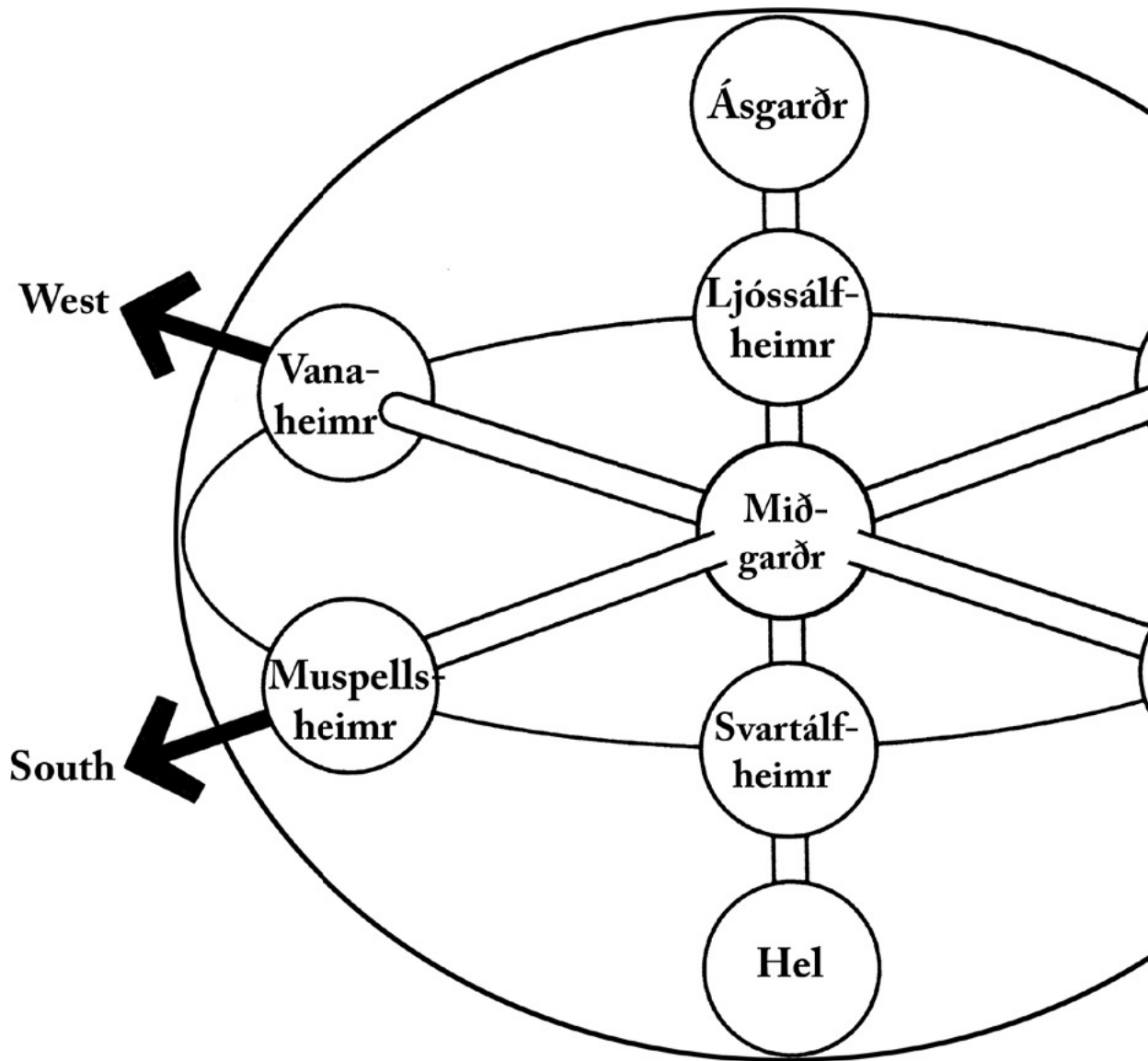


Fig. 2.4: Germanic Cosmological Map

Time is a concept intimately connected to cosmological ideas. The Germanic conception of time is most profoundly enshrined in its system of verb tenses. Germanic languages have a past tense and a present tense, but the future tense, as found in other Indo-European languages, must be constructed from a combination of verbs in other tenses, for example, “was”–“is”–“*will be*.” That which *was* is focused and concrete, that which *is* is focused and clear, but that which *will be* is (or *can be*) malleable and fluid. So the Germanic concept of the flow of time is not a past–present–future model, but rather a past–present/non-past model.¹⁹ The “past” = the *real* world (i.e., the *ideal*), while the present moment is the time/place where action has the opportunity to “feed” the past. Usually, however, humans go about their lives in unthinking, unwise ways and the determining power of the past simply dictates the shape of the “non-past.” This is the source of the famous Germanic “fatalism.” The names of the Norns reflect this conception as well. Urðr is that which *became* or turned, Verðandi is that which *is becoming* or turning, and Skuld is that which *should*, or must (happen), given the nature of the first two terms. Urðr and Verðandi are both derived from the same verb, ON *verða*, “to become,” while Skuld is derived from another verb, *skulu*, “should, must.”

This peculiar concept of time also forms a deep-level model for the legitimacy (and even necessity) of the very idea of reawakening *past* models in order to regain a more *real* or *ideal* view of life and the world. In other words, this idea may explain the persistent and recurring effort to discover and reactivate dormant patterns in Germanic culture.

The ancient Germanic cosmology was thought to be an order with a high degree of perfection. There was no idea that the world was in a “fallen state.” This is not to say that the ancients believed the world was perfect, just that individuals or groups of people (clans, tribes, and so forth) had the potential of being perfected in the world *as it existed*. Therefore, the practices of the ancient Germanic peoples focused on maintaining the good order, rather than restoring a lost one. This would be one of the major qualitative differences between ancient and current expressions of Germanic cultural models.

Eschatology is the doctrine concerned with how the cosmic order will come to an end, or be destroyed. Such a destruction of the world has been said to be the only thing Germanic warriors feared. A good deal of the mythology surrounding Óðinn involves his efforts to foresee and to forestall the inevitable demise of the world-order, as well as perhaps ensuring its renewal after the general destruction.²⁰ Several facts stand out about Germanic eschatology. The destruction of the world is inevitable because: (1) what has been ordered by consciousness must as a matter of course eventually be dismantled, and (2) the cosmic order came into being due to a “crime” (a break in a previous state of order), the repercussion of which is also unavoidably the demise of the present order. Additionally, this destruction is seen as a negative thing, to be avoided and put off as long as possible. Finally, the resolution of order back into relative unconscious disorder will only be temporary, but the *seed* of conscious ordering is essential and ultimately indestructible.

Conventionally, the Old Norse term *ragnarök* is used to describe the destruction of the world. The term really means the “judgment,” or “plan” of the gods (*regin* = [divine] advisors). Given the real meaning of the word, it should come as no surprise that it could just as easily be used to describe the *birth* of the world-order.²¹

The process of archaic Germanic cosmology shows an impersonal evolution of order out of chaos, with a subsequent development of consciousness (divinity) that rebels against the then-prevailing order, thereby instituting a more rational (consciously planned) cosmos. This cosmos is multi-layered (or *multiversal*), with a complex system of mutually dependent, interlocking, or interweaving parts. As with all things which come into being, this order is doomed to destruction. But, just as inevitably, the implicit patterns of consciousness will reassert themselves—some regenerated, some surviving—in a state of being beyond the destruction.

Germanic Customs

It is unlikely that many ancient Germanic men or women spent much time speculating about matters of cosmology or the human soul. These ideas were, rather, implicit in their actions. The most obvious examples of actions that reflect underlying patterns of belief are such things as religious, legal, and political customs and practices. It is primarily through customs that symbolic culture is developed and maintained in a group. It is through such customs that humans demonstrate their relationships with each other and with the world around them (including their relationship to the gods and other spiritual beings).

Religious customs encompass all those symbolic acts that orient and integrate the individual into the social structure, and the social structure (clan/tribe or *comitatus*) into the greater cosmic whole. Our sources for such customs in archaic times are myriad. Information has been gleaned from written literary records, later folklore, and archaeology.²² Here we will examine the more conspicuous customs, such as official calendrical festivals and important rites of passage.

Perhaps the most important religious festival in the ancient Germanic past is the one that remains the most important today—the Yuletide. It came around the time of the winter solstice and lasted for several (typically twelve) days. Yule was the time of cosmic death and renewal and for *growth* (ON *til gróðrar*) in the coming year. It was the chief period for the worship of the ancestors. In the depth of the winter, the clan would gather indoors, consume special foods and drinks saved throughout the year, and sacrifice a boar (upon whose bristles oaths were sworn). Outdoors in the nearby forest, a special tree was decorated and provided with gifts to the ancestors. Tales were told of the dead and at the end of the Yuletide all emerged renewed.

The spring festival was apparently named after the goddess of the spring, OE Eostre or OHG Ôstara—a name now transferred to the Christian celebration of Christ’s resurrection. It took place sometime around the spring equinox—although other natural signs (first robin, violet, and so forth) were usually used as the signal, not a mechanical celestial observation. It is for this reason that all of these festivals tended to be celebrated at slightly different times from tribe to tribe between the Alps and the Arctic Circle. The significance of Eostre-time is the return of vitality to nature. It is accompanied by processions, and sacrifices are offered for victory (ON *til sigrs*).

Midsummer (the middle of the summer-half of the year, around the summer solstice) was accompanied by the lighting of bonfires on hills or mountains. The people danced around the fire and jumped over it in pairs. The fire both heals the people and strengthens the sun for the beginning descent into winter. Often poles, later called “May-poles,” were erected at this time, although the custom was practiced at other times as well.

Autumnal (or harvest- and threshing-time) festivals included the Norse *vetrnætr*, or “winter nights.” This occurred around the time of modern-day October 14. It is said to be for “good harvest” (ON *til árs*). In Scandinavia *vetrnætr* was the time of the new year.

Although there were a number of sacrificial festivals throughout the year, it is well known that the ancient Germanic peoples held *three* times of the year to be the most sacred.²³ However, the exact times of these three, and hence their exact identities, varied from region to region and from tribe to tribe. Sacrificial festivals also had political, legislative, and economic dimensions. These marked the significant moments in the annual cycle of time for whole clans and tribes, or groups of tribes, that shared religious characteristics.

On the level of the lives of individuals, certain rites or ceremonies were practiced which marked significant stages of life. These are called “rites of passage”; the most universal and important of them mark birth, adulthood, marriage, and death.²⁴

Birth often took place in seclusion in the care of midwives. The newborn child was laid upon the bare earth immediately after being born. The child would then be evaluated for life-worthiness. Usually, deformed children would be killed or exposed. When the healthy child was accepted into the clan by the father, he would sprinkle water on it and give it its name. Children were usually named after dead ancestors, as it was believed that the dead family members were perpetually “reincarnated” in their descendants.²⁵ In this way the clan demonstrated visibly and concretely the immortality of the individual and of the collective whole.

At puberty or sometime afterward children would be initiated into adulthood, or full clanic membership. Such rites were not the same for all children, of course. Boys and girls underwent different experiences, and those belonging to an aristocratic clan would presumably have an experience far different from those of the peasantry. We are best informed about such rites as they relate to aristocratic boys.²⁶ They would be removed from the company of women and instructed in the tribal traditions before being subjected to tests of courage and strength. These may include anything from a symbolic slaying of a monster to the actual killing of a wild beast or an enemy in battle. At the conclusion of this ordeal, the boy becomes a full-fledged man and member of the clan with the right and obligation to bear weapons.

Marriage involved the removal of the bride from the domicile of her father and her relocation to the home of her husband’s family. In this time of transition, the bride had to be protected from malevolent forces to which she might be vulnerable in her liminal state. This is why the movement from one place to the other had to be quick, and this is why she would be hidden (and even veiled) to conceal her identity. The marriage itself involved a simple rite, such as an exchange of rings within a circle (or ring) before witnesses. The marriage was not completed until it was sexually consummated. In the new home the bride was carried across the threshold and carried around the hearth-fire of the house. Heathen customs surrounding marriage ceremonies remain extremely strong because the medieval church took little official interest in them until the time of the Reformation.

The customs surrounding death show some similarly conservative features. However, even though inhumation had been practiced alongside cremation at various times among the pre-Christian Germanic tribes, cremation of the dead was one custom that was eliminated fairly quickly after nominal Christianization had begun. Because the ancient Germanic peoples conceived of the dead, living, and unborn as a whole “society,” death was not seen as a cessation of life, but rather a critical (and dangerous) moment of transition. Shortly after death, neighbors and even the domestic animals and bees received a formal announcement. The body was laid on straw (later ritually disposed of) on a board, and the eyes and mouth were sealed (to prevent re-entry of the soul). A vigil (wake) was kept over the body as long as it remained unburied or uncremated. There were special dances, and songs of lament—called *carmina diabolica* by church authorities—were sung.²⁷ The dead were always accompanied by grave goods—sometimes elaborate, sometimes simple. Men were usually buried or burned with their weapons. At certain times after the disposal of the body—on the third, seventh, and thirteenth day, and then one year after burial—a sacrificial meal was held at the gravesite. This emphasized the ongoing living relationship between the “living” and the “dead.” At the Yuletide all the dead were ritually remembered.

Germanic Legal Customs

It is remarkable how many of our ideas of law and politics in Anglo-American culture are derived from ancient Germanic customs. Our main sources for the ancient concepts are the legal codes recorded in the early Middle Ages,

and linguistic and other literary evidence that supports what is found in the law books. Of greatest interest here are the ancient ideas on what later came to be called “human rights” (including the rights of women), concepts of law and criminal conduct, and political structures or institutions.

The great mass of people in ancient Germanic society were free men and women. Free men bore arms and took part in the *þing*, the legal assembly. Within this group there was often a functional aristocracy made up of leading families. In theory all free men were perhaps “equal” under the law, but in practice the leading wealthy or otherwise powerful families must have wielded great power. It is noteworthy that the oldest known tribal law code, the *Lex Salica*, does not mention a separate noble class apart from the free men (*Franci*). The exact relationship of the mass of free men to any aristocracy or nobility varied from tribe to tribe.²⁸

One of the most remarkable aspects of Germanic social history is the unusual level of rights accorded to women. These rights are especially well-attested and recorded in the Viking Age (800–1100). Women could own land and manage their own property. In household affairs they had virtually complete authority and often managed large farmsteads for extended periods. They could divorce their husbands for abuse of any kind, or for disgracing them in any way. These rights did not extend to participation in the *þing*, however. Women did not take part in this legal assembly and so could not bring lawsuits or other matters before the assembly.

Like all ancient peoples, the ancient Germanic peoples held slaves. The slave-class formed a permanent caste, but their numbers could also be increased by taking prisoners of war (females and children). Slaves could also be freed and consequently bear arms, but generally they could not take part in the *þing*.

The Germanic peoples had a very particular idea of what *law* was—how it was formed and how justice was to be meted out according to its nature. The word *law* (OE *lagu*, ON *lög*) refers to past deeds that are *laid* down in *layers* of action. Past action and legal precedent determine what is right to do in any present case involving sufficiently similar circumstances. This is the principle of Germanic customary law—usually referred to as “English Common Law” today. In theory the Anglo-American code of law is still based on these principles of precedent to this day. Clearly these concepts are deeply rooted in Germanic cosmology. In this system it is essential that *truth* be arrived at in an adversarial process. One of the most ancient Germanic concepts of *battle* of any kind was that it was a “judgment by arms” (ON *vápnadómr*). Actual trial by combat was well known in the most ancient Germanic legal codes.²⁹ The same principles are extended to combat through words in the *þing*, or legal assembly, where lawsuits were tried. The Icelandic sagas abound in examples of this legal procedure. The theory extends all the way to modern American courtrooms, where both sides fight with words and a judge or jury decides the outcome. The institution of the legal jury is also a feature of Germanic legal tradition.

Certain other features of Germanic law also require our attention. In criminal cases (such as those involving murder, personal injury, or theft) a trial might be held to determine guilt, but any compensation or fine was to be paid to the injured party (or his survivors). This extended to fines levied for manslaughter, for which the family received *weregild* (“man-payment”). Outlawry was a common practice. Here an offender would be declared “outside the law.” This meant that the family of the victim could kill the offender without legal repercussions. The outlaw could also flee the country. Capital punishment was carried out by the royal or commonwealth authority in cases where the whole clan or tribe, or more especially the tribal gods themselves, had been offended by the crime. The method of execution was determined by the god who was offended by the act. For example, cowardice in battle was punished by *hanging*, the method determined by the god Óðinn/Wōden. As Wōden was the high-god, his mode of execution became generalized, surviving in official Anglo-American culture until the beginning of the twentieth century. The act of capital punishment was intended as a way of rebalancing the scale, which had been knocked out of balance by the offending deed.

These and many other aspects of ancient Germanic culture have survived in “secularized” and even “Christianized” theoretical forms until recent times. The fact that many of these customs and practices have been under recent pressure to change or be abolished is a testament to the increasing ignorance of our heritage and the accelerated encroachment of unproven and exotic and/or modern theories.

Among the most important legal ideas are the concepts of sovereignty and the political theories behind it, as well as the practical political forms derived from these concepts. Sovereignty is the legitimate power to rule or govern, and the power and freedom to execute the aims of rulership. It is the first Dumézilian function. In Christian medieval political theory, this power was thought to be derived from God. In Enlightenment political theory, it is said to be derived from the consent of the governed (i.e., “the people”). The ancient Germanic concept of sovereignty seems to have shared aspects of both of these later views.

Sovereign power was ultimately derived from the gods. Óðinn/ Wōden, Týr/Tiw, and Freyr/(Frēa?) all strongly demonstrate sovereign characteristics. However, this divine quality, like other divine qualities, was *immanent* in at least a portion of humanity. Those who possessed a lineage from the gods—and this could theoretically include virtually all free-folk—formed a kind of aristocracy. Therefore, sovereign power is divine, but it is also expressed

through and by a certain class or select group of humans. This natural aristocratic class could organize or institutionalize the exercise of sovereign power in various ways.

There appear to have been three principal modalities for the organization of such political structures: (sacral) kingship,³⁰ war-leadership, or a republic. These various types of organization vary from tribe to tribe and from time-period to time-period. Sacral kingship seems to have been especially prevalent in Sweden, while the war-leader type of kings (or Lat. *duces*) appear to have been common along the Rhine, and the republic-style government is well attested in Iceland. It is not unlikely that these are three traditional structural responses to differing strategic, social, political, and economic conditions.

In this ancient Germanic tradition the sacred king, like all kings, was *elected*. He was elected for life by, and from among, the aristocratic men gathered in the *þing* or in the Anglo-Saxon *witan* (council). The word *king* simply means “descendent of (good) kin.” The right kind of man was elected for the times. A weak figurehead might be good when there was peace and cooperation among the clans and families, while a strong leader was desirable if peace needed to be restored in times of trouble. The king was “magically” responsible for peace and prosperity in the land, and was liable to be killed as a sacrifice if things did not go well during his reign. A sacred king was also the chief priest of his people. His power was extremely limited in a practical sense and could be further curtailed by the aristocracy if the need arose.

The war-leader type of king was a different story. Certain tribes were perpetually mobilized for war. War-leader kings were elected for the duration of the conflict—which may be conceived of as a perpetual state of war in some instances. In any event, the aristocracy, once having elected the war-leader, owed their unquestioned allegiance and loyalty to him. This mechanism among the German tribes is the secret of why the Romans were never able to conquer them, whereas the Celts were relatively easy to overcome.³¹ This autocratic, militarized principle of political organization was the theory behind the war-band organization as well, and perhaps has its origins there. The operative aspect is that there is a *mission* involved—be it a defensive or aggressive one.

The republican form of government was probably common in more remote regions. It recognized the sovereignty of the law itself and that of free-men—especially those who owned large pieces of land. No king was known in this form of government, but each landholder functioned as a sort of minor king over his farmstead (which could be vast in places like Norway and Iceland). Historically, the republican form of political organization was increasingly pushed into the more remote areas, and across the sea to islands such as Iceland, the Faeroes, Shetland, and the Orkneys. The cause of this migration was the encroachment of monarchy in the Christian/ European style of relative absolutism. The Icelandic Althing (ON *alþingi*) remains the oldest republican institution in Europe.

Much more could be written on the topic of Germanic customs, but space must limit us to what has been said. This is a vast subject and one that is of interest insofar as it concerns the survival of folk-customs and beliefs, as well as their role in the conscious reawakening of forgotten forms.

Germanic Aesthetics

The arts of the various ancient, pre-Christian, and early medieval Germanic cultures bear many striking features that provide insight into the soul of these early peoples. These features will be valuable assets in demonstrating how the ancient Germanic culture was, or was not, being awakened in subsequent centuries.

Aesthetics is the branch of philosophy concerned with critically evaluating what constitutes the *beautiful*.³² Whether or not one is interested in pursuing a universal philosophy in such matters, it must be conceded that on the obvious level different cultures have differing standards of beauty. Here we will limit ourselves to general discussions of verbal and visual arts, since various examples of these have survived from the ancient period. This is followed by a brief exploration of runic inscriptions from an aesthetic perspective. If we can glimpse the essence of the ancient Germanic sense of the beautiful, we will have developed a keen lens for further cultural criticism.

The verbal arts—both poetic and prosaic—not only offer us contextual information about ancient Germanic culture, but the very *forms* these arts take provide invaluable aesthetic information. Our sources for Germanic poetry range from Anglo-Saxon poems (eighth–tenth centuries), to the Eddic and skaldic poetry of Scandinavia (ninth–fifteenth centuries), to more limited representations of this art from Old High German and Old Saxon, as well as some examples of poetic craft from the runic inscriptions (which can be dated to as early as the fifth century).³³ The poetry is especially valuable, as it is more purely Germanic in its style—that is, relatively free of classical influence. The same cannot generally be said of much of the earliest Germanic prose, which was often slavishly imitative of Greek or Latin originals. This is most clearly the case with the Gothic Bible of Ulfila. The most notable exception to this generalization is the prose of medieval Iceland. As is the case with poetry, the verbal craftsmanship evident in the sagas stands out from other contemporaneous examples of verbal artistry from neighboring cultures.

Germanic poetry, from its earliest beginnings to the High Middle Ages, is marked by a certain aesthetic sense. It is based on alliteration (Ger. *Stabreim*), which, it has been speculated, had its origins in runic oracular speech. In this form of poetry, the meta-linguistic, or meta-semantic, links between the words are provided by a certain pattern of stressed syllables beginning with the same sound. End-rhyme was relatively rare in pre-Christian Germania. A few lines from the eighth-century Old English poem *Beowulf* will illustrate the principle and demonstrate the general structure of Germanic verse:

Þæt la, mæg sécgan
frémeð on fólce,
éald éðelweard,
*gebóren bétera!*³⁴

sé þe sóð ond riht
féor eal gemon,
þæt ðes éorl wære

There are three alliterating sounds, or “staves,” per whole line. Each line is made up of two half-lines, linked by the common pattern of alliteration in both halves. The alliterating words in the above excerpt are marked in **bold** and the accented syllables are also indicated. The first line is linked by the *s*-sound, the second by the *f*-sound, and the third by a vowel sound (all vowels are equivalent for alliterative purposes). A famous typology of the forms of Germanic versification was worked out by Eduard Sievers.³⁵ Eddic poetry tends to apply the rules rather loosely, while skaldic poetry is perhaps the most complex and rule-bound poetic form ever devised.³⁶

The content of old Germanic poetry was generally heroic and/ or mythological, although it could be turned to highly personal and psychological purposes, for example with Egill Skallagrímsson’s *Sonatorrek* in which he mourns the loss of his sons. The poems were originally composed and memorized by the poet without the use of writing. The best and most memorable of these poems were handed down for generations before being committed to parchment. As early as the first century CE, Tacitus, writing in *Germania*, makes reference to the Germanic peoples having *carmina antiqua* (ancient songs) that record the traditions of the people. Germanic poetry had the function of recording inspired words in memorable form so that important mythological data and heroic deeds (both quasi-divine and historically human) could be more easily passed from one generation to the next.

Earlier it was thought that the Icelandic sagas were written records of oral tales. This theory has fallen out of favor of late, but it cannot be doubted that the sagas were intended to represent a record of the past directly and personally linked to the contemporaneous readers of the sagas. These tales elucidated the past in clear terms and, as we have seen, knowledge of the past (*urðr*) is the most meaningful kind of information for a people to have in order to see both the present and the non-past (or “future”) clearly. Saga material is often the backbone of legal cases, as it can provide the all-important precedent for specific types of situations.

The sagas are remarkable for their clear and concise style of writing. They are action-packed stories because they concern human beings and their *deeds*. From the chain of actions and interactions, conflicts and their resolution over generations, the whole saga emerges. The terse style of prose employed by the saga-writers anticipates the realistic prose style of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by several hundred years. It is something totally unlike what is found elsewhere in Europe at the time (thirteenth–fourteenth centuries). Notable too is the fact that the prose of the sagas is very often interspersed with poetic digressions or expansions. It seems that the prose has sometimes been built up around the more archaic poetic material.

The Icelandic saga material is vast and fills many volumes of printed text. It ranges from historically realistic representations of contemporaneous life in Iceland to portrayals of mythic and sometimes fanciful events from the distant past (*in illo tempore*). The most important of these “sagas of ancient times” (ON *fornaldarsögur*) is the *Völsunga Saga*. This includes an account of the life of Sigurðr (Siegfried), the dragon-slayer, and is the closest thing we have to a pan-Germanic “national” epic. This material is also used in the German national epic, the *Nibelungenlied*, and is referred to in the English national epic, *Beowulf*. Its contents continue to inspire writers and other artists right up to the present day.³⁷

Germanic Visual Arts

Thousands of material objects that represent Germanic artwork from the earliest times until the Middle Ages provide a good deal of data from which we can gain a solid sense of ancient Germanic visual aesthetics. An enormous amount of the art was, of course, lost because it was carved or painted on perishable substances such as wood. But the surviving material is surely representative of the kinds of art produced in the various periods of the history of Germanic art. The main source for our knowledge is the body of material evidence that has been cataloged and classified by archaeologists and art historians, especially since the early 1800s.³⁸ The topic of Germanic art history

is too vast and complex to handle in any great detail here. Our main purpose is to show the very general characteristics of the ancient, pre-Christian visual aesthetics of the Germanic peoples. We will consider sculpture and manuscript illumination as examples of visual art, and some examples of architectural features.

Sculpture is most often found in the media of metal and stone. Most examples must be categorized as primarily ornamental or decorative. However, some sculptures can be analyzed iconographically. The only possible keys to interpreting the iconographic features are written evidence and comparative data. It appears that the art reflects certain symbolic elements important to the mythology of the Germanic peoples. These elements include animals (such as the serpent, wolf, or raven) and scenes from narrative myths (for example, Sigurðr's dragon-slaying or Baldr's death). The style of early Germanic art is highly abstract. The pre-Christian Germanic peoples did not produce the sort of naturalistic representational art that is common to classical civilization.

Examples of the styles of depiction from various epochs will illustrate these points: [Figure 2.4](#) shows a boar (from a piece of jewelry) dated to the Roman Age (ca. 250 CE); [Figure 2.5](#) shows a C-type bracteate signifying Wōðanaz riding a horse (ca. 450–550); [Figure 2.6](#) shows another image of this god on the ninth-century Alskog picture stone from Gotland; while [Figures 2.7–9](#) illustrate Viking Age animal ornaments from the Jelling, Urnes, and Ringerike styles, respectively.

Many of the same design features that are prominent in such works in metal or stone also figure in early manuscript illustration. The interlace-work frequently characterized as “Celtic” is just as often actually Germanic in origin. The heartland of the magnificent tradition of manuscript illumination was actually northern England and the style is called Hiberno-Saxon. It is especially with the zoomorphic ornamental style that the specifically Germanic (as opposed to the Celtic) aesthetic is expressed. The Celtic sensibility leaned more toward the *vegomorphic* designs. In the geometric styles of ornament, the Germanic aesthetic seems to have favored angular design, whereas the Celts used more curved lines.



Fig. 2.4: Boar fibula of Zauschwitz (ca. 250 CE);



Fig. 2.5: Djupbrunns I gold bracteate (C-type) from Gotland, Sweden

Very few examples of ancient Germanic architecture remain. This is because the Germanic peoples built almost exclusively in wood, which eventually rots or burns. Some eyewitness accounts refer to the magnificent nature of their wooden structures. For example, Jordanes reports that Priscus says of the palace of Attila, a structure likely built by the Germanic Goths, that the wooden walls were fitted so well that the union of the boards could not be distinguished and that one could see vast halls and porticoes planned with great beauty.³⁹ Archaeological remains allow for the reconstruction of many Germanic wooden structures—some of them as long as one hundred yards. The only remaining examples of pre-Christian architectural design and aesthetics are, ironically enough, found in the surviving Norwegian stave churches. Structures of this kind are not specifically Scandinavian, but were common to all of northern Europe. It is likely that they are our best windows on pre-Christian architectural aesthetics. Some idea of their magnificence can be gained from [Figure 4.8](#). Although none of these buildings actually served as a heathen temple, most would have replaced such temples, and since the aesthetic and design principles are entirely of a northern European type it is most likely that the older buildings would have been very similar in form. Archaeological evidence also suggests this.⁴⁰



Fig. 2.6: Gotlandic picture stone of Alskog, Tjängvide I (9th century);



Fig. 2.7: Jelling cup (10th century);



Fig. 2.8: Urnes-style woodcarving (Urnes church, Norway) ;



Fig. 2.9: Tombstone in Ringerike style, found in St. Paul's Churchyard, London

Runestones

A unique blend or synthesis of art forms can be seen in the Germanic runic monuments. These are known from the thousands of extant examples found mainly in Scandinavia, Germany, and England.⁴¹ Although these are usually studied either for their runological (verbal) content or their art-historical (iconographical) importance, in reality they constitute a particular Germanic art form that synthesizes these two symbolic forms of communication.

The content of the verbal portion of a runestone is most often *memorial* in character. That is, the inscription usually memorialized a deceased person. In such formulas a sponsor for the stone and the runemaster or rune-carver might also be remembered. The best examples of these formulas are in poetic meter.⁴² The graphic content of the inscription—usually in the form of a zoomorphic ornament within which the runes are carved—belongs to the same iconographical tradition as other Germanic ornament. The fact that they are so often juxtaposed is, however, significant. It appears that these monuments represent a mature Germanic craft that synthesized verbal and iconographical symbolism into a *functional* work of art. A typical example of this synthesis is seen in [Figure 2.10](#).



Fig. 2.10: Drävle stone (Uppland, Sweden)

This brief and cursory exploration of ancient Germanic aesthetics has only been intended to serve as a touchstone for future discussions of art during the various historical phases of the reawakening of Germanic cultural features. What we have learned is that ancient Germanic verbal arts, when poetic, were alliterative and complex, and when prosaic, terse and factual. The visual arts were abstract and highly stylized, diverging from classical models of naturalistic representation. In all cases the Germanic mythic world seems to have been the primary inspiration for artists. As we look ahead we will see how these ancient Germanic aesthetics have, or have not, been used by later artists, and why.

The purpose of this chapter has been to introduce the major characteristics of the ancient, pre-Christian, or “heathen,” Germanic tradition. This topic is far too vast to be covered in any exhaustive way in the space available here. However, a basic understanding of the contents of this chapter *as a whole* will serve as a guide for the reading of the subsequent chapters. The main point here has been the complex nature of the Germanic tradition, as it spans what modern observers might categorize as religion, science, law, and art. A broad understanding of this complex aspect of pre-Christian tradition and culture is also indispensable to an accurate interpretation of the events surrounding the so-called “conversions” of the Germanic peoples.

1. For a discussion of runic hermeneutics, see my article “How to Do Things with Runes.”

2. One of Rupert Sheldrake’s earliest books, *The Presence of the Past*, introduces this controversial idea. Ideas rooted in the natural sciences are quite tertiary to our study, however.

3. See Vries, *AR*, I, 50–82, as well as his general outline of the history of the investigation of mythology, *Forschungsgeschichte der Mythologie*. Perhaps the best general survey of this topic in English is that of Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, 1–34.
4. For a convenient translation of many of these important sources, see Chisholm, *Grove and Gallows*.
5. Lay “scholarship” abounds in examples of erroneous connections between cultures, for example, an alleged link between ancient Egypt and Meso-America on the basis that both had “pyramids.” Such a claim ignores the fact that the Egyptian pyramids were built some two thousand years before those in Meso-America.
6. For a concise presentation of the problems associated with linguistics in this context, see Lehmann, *Historical Linguistics*.
7. It has been widely remarked, especially by art historians, that there was a significant influence on the Germanic peoples first by the Scythians and later by the Sarmatians. See Rice, *The Scythians*, 185–90; but cf. also Holmqvist, *Germanic Art during the First Millennium A.D.*, 15–16, which traces the origins of this kind of art to the Romans.
8. See Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*.
9. See Flowers, “Toward an Archaic Germanic Psychology,” and the bibliography found there.
10. The most widely known, if somewhat controversial, study of this belief is the 1937 book by Eckhardt, *Irdische Unsterblichkeit*. See also Flowers, “Is Sigurðr Sigmundr aptþorbinn?” on this belief in connection with the saga of Sigurðr, as recounted in the *Völsunga Saga* and related texts.
11. The literature on this subject is vast, as it concerns matters of religion (see, e.g., the classic study by Höfler, *Kultische Geheimbünde der Germanen*), history, and politics (see, e.g., Moss, *The Birth of the Middle Ages*, passim; Green, *The Carolingian Lord*; and Lindow, *Comitatus, Individual and Honor*).
12. This idea of group solidarity as a cultural and religious feature is best discussed in Russell, *The Germanization*, 128–30 et passim.
13. Perhaps the best-known exponent of this idea is Karl Helm, whose 1943 monograph *Wotan* is focused on this theory.
14. The most convenient single work for understanding Dumézil’s theories on the Germanic pantheon is his *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, to which should also be added Littleton’s *New Comparative Mythology* in order to get a greater Indo-European perspective on his theory of tripartition.
15. Dumézil, *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, 26–48.
16. Russell (*The Germanization*, 4) contrasts this “world-accepting” view with the “world-rejecting” view of religions such as orthodox Christianity.
17. See Vries’s etymology of *ginnungagap* in *AeW*, 167–68, and also his 1930 article “Ginnungagap” on this cosmological concept.
18. See Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology*, 284–90.
19. This insight on the structure of time in Germanic language and culture was pioneered by Bauschatz, *The Well and the Tree*.
20. For discussion of the Germanic eschatological mythology, see Vries, *AR*, II, 393–405, and Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion*, 280–85. For a discussion of the supposed Christian elements in Eddic eschatology, see Nielsen, “Hver tíðendi eru at segja frá um ragnarökr?”
21. On the meaning of *ragnarök*, see *C-V*, 488–89 (*regin*), 507 (*rökr*); and Vries, *AeW*, 432.
22. Vries *AR*, I, 445–83.
23. For a discussion of these yearly festivals, see Vries, *AR*, I, 446–46.
24. These are discussed in some detail by Vries, *AR*, I, 172–99, and Wikman, *Livets Högtider*.
25. See Eckhardt, *Irdische Unsterblichkeit*, and Flowers, “Is Sigurðr Sigmundr aptþorbinn?” and the bibliography found there.
26. See, for example, Weiser, *Altgermanische Jünglingsweihe und Männerbünde*.
27. See Vries, *AR*, I, 191.
28. See Mildenerberger, *Sozial- und Kulturgeschichte der Germanen*, 64ff.
29. See the numerous examples from various Germanic legal codes translated in Chisholm, *Grove and Gallows*.
30. The sometimes controversial idea of sacral kingship is studied in great detail by Höfler in his 1952 book *Germanisches Sakralkönigtum*.
31. This is outlined by Caesar in *De bello Gallico*, I, 2.
32. For a convenient collection of important writings on the idea of aesthetics, see Hofstadter and Kuhns, eds., *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*.
33. For examples of the latter, see Krause-Jankuhn, *Die Runeninschriften im älteren Futhark*, 110–13, 272–74, and also the examples of poetry in runic inscriptions given in Jansson, *Runes in Sweden*, 131–43.
34. *Beowulf*, ll. 1700–1704a. Translation: “Indeed, this man can say / who furthers truth and right / among our people / who remembers all our past / [and is an] old guardian of the homeland, / that this prince was / born the better man.”
35. See Sievers, *Altgermanische Metrik*, and also Heusler, *Die altgermanische Dichtung*.
36. See Hollander, *The Skalds*, and Hallberg, *Old Icelandic Poetry*, 105–72.
37. For an impressive collection concerning many aspects of the Nibelungen tradition throughout various cultures and time periods, as well as further references, see Gentry, et al., eds., *The Nibelungen Tradition*.
38. Of course, the art-historical literature concerning the Germanic peoples is vast. Two important works in this area are Holmqvist, *Germanic Art during the First Millennium A.D.*, and Adama van Scheltema, *Die altnordische Kunst*.
39. This is referred to by Jordanes in his Gothic history (XXXIV, 178–79). Recent archaeological reconstructions may also give some idea of the magnitude and magnificence of the ancient Germanic wooden structures. However, many of these reconstructions do not display the level of fine craftsmanship that may have actually been featured in the ancient buildings.
40. For more on the art of the Norwegian stave church, see Roar, *Norwegian Stave Churches*. For a wider survey of the topic of architectural art in the Nordic countries, see Norberg-Schulz, *Nightlands*.
41. The best general introduction to runology is Düwel, *Runenkunde*, which also contains an extensive bibliography relating to runic studies on 236–71. The only general treatments of the topic in English are Elliott, *Runes: An Introduction*, and Barnes, *Runes: A Handbook*.
42. See Jansson, *Runes in Sweden*, 131–43, for some of these examples.

Chapter III

The Coming of Christianity

Christian Revolution and the Process of “Conversion” in Germania

Traditional Germanic culture was profoundly disrupted and transformed by the slow and steady introduction of Christianity over a period lasting almost a thousand years (ca. 350–1100), but it would be an error to assume that the introduction of Christianity destroyed traditional Germanic culture, or that the roots of the latter were cut in such a way that they could not be restored. This chapter contains a historical survey of how each major cultural sphere was Christianized, discussions of the major types of patterns for this Christianization process, and a review of certain common themes in the confrontation between Christianity and traditional Germanic culture. This historical survey can hardly be an exhaustive one. The reader is referred to the voluminous specialized material dedicated to this topic.¹ However, a basic and somewhat in-depth treatment of the process of Christianization is necessary to show how essential traditional Germanic cultural features maintained themselves in spite of the “conversion” to Christianity.

The idea of “conversion” was critically introduced in [Chapter One](#). In the main, this term would be a misleading one to use in conjunction with the cultural and historical process we are outlining here because it implies some sort of inner conviction or belief on the part of the individual or groups being “converted.” By every account, such a sense of inner conviction was more often than not entirely lacking in the early phases of the Christianization of the Germanic peoples. They were by no means unique in this ambivalence.

Christian missionary activity followed one of several possible paths. Christianity could establish itself in an urban underclass and progressively expand by taking advantage of the decay of the existing order. (This was the usual pattern in the urbanized Mediterranean.) Or it could depend on the

conversion—whether nominal or sincere—of a king or military leader who then *de facto* “converted” his subjects or followers to Christianity. This same king or war-leader could then conquer neighboring, non-Christian tribes and forcibly convert them to Christianity. In these latter cases especially, no true spiritual conversion to the beliefs of Christianity was required.

What, then, were the beliefs of Christianity? This is a fundamental question to ask at this juncture because any question of true conversion to Christianity *per se* would have to involve a personal conviction regarding its tenets. Before the fourth century CE, there was little in the way of formal dogmas throughout the Christian churches and cults that had spread from the Levant throughout the Mediterranean, Middle East, and the Near Eastern regions. In 325, however, the Council of Nicaea established the dogma of the Trinity, that God was three “persons” (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) in one God. At the close of the following century, Augustine of Hippo developed a formal set of dogmas on free will, original sin, and grace that completed the fundamentals of Christian doctrine. Note that by this time (ca. 400 CE) Christianity had already made progress throughout the Mediterranean region.

The doctrine of free will states that God has free will (the ability to do anything at any time) and that man was endowed with the gift of free will by the creator in order that man might love and praise God and obey God’s laws (of man’s own free will). This is the sense in which man was said to be “created in God’s image.” The doctrine of original sin states that man disobeyed God (by eating of the forbidden Tree of Knowledge) and thus underwent a *Fall*. Man is now in a fallen state as the result of the original sin of the first man, Adam. All humans suffer the consequences of this original sin. The doctrine of grace states that the only way out of this fallen state is for the individual human being to receive God’s grace (= gift) of salvation. The chief sign of God’s grace is recounted in the myth of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, who was believed to be the second person of the Trinity (the Son) incarnate. To be an orthodox (“right-opinioned”) Christian, the individual had to adhere to these dogmas. By the way, these dogmas have not changed in modern times and were unaffected by the Reformation.

What is important to realize is that the earliest acceptance of Christianity in any form by any Germanic people (such as the early Roman conversions by a few Visigoths, followed by the mission of Ulfila [Wulfilas] in the fourth century CE) is roughly contemporaneous with the first developments in formal Christian dogma. This means that the Germanic peoples were initially

confronted by a relatively weak form of Christianity that was still fluid in terms of its doctrine. In the history of the Christianization of the Germanic peoples it will be found that factors of politics, military strategy, and economics far outweigh considerations of religious doctrine or personal belief.

The Christianization of the Germanic peoples came about in three phases: (1) the Gothic phase, ca. 350–500; (2) the early medieval (or continental) phase, ca. 500–950; and (3) the later medieval (or Nordic) phase, ca. 950–1100. The Gothic phase took place mainly in the Mediterranean and Black Sea regions and stemmed from the mission of Bishop Ulfilá. This influenced many Germanic tribes streaming into the collapsing Roman Empire, for example, the Goths, Vandals, and Burgundians. The Gothic phase left little in the way of a lasting impression on the Germanic peoples, as the Goths eventually converted to Roman Catholicism and faded from the historical scene. The continental phase dates from the time of the conversion and baptism of the Frankish king Clovis to Roman Catholicism at the end of the fifth century, to the time of the baptism of Harald Bluetooth (Gormsson) in Denmark in the 960s. During this second phase, Christendom was both consolidated on the European continent and in England, and at the same time Christianity itself received a tremendous influence from Germanic culture. Finally, the Nordic phase that followed the baptism of Harald Bluetooth spans to the time of the destruction of the sanctuary at Uppsala, sometime around 1100.

Christianization of the Goths

The Goths were an East Germanic people, the last remnants of which died out on the Crimean peninsula perhaps as late as the eighteenth century. “Gothic” is a word that echoes through history. The reason for this is that the ancient Goths put their imprint on most of Europe, and were considered by many other peoples to be an exemplary ancestral race. In Spain the word *godos* is still used of aristocrats, while the Old Norse poetic speech uses *gotar* as an honorific. The Goths rose out of the dark mists of the north, burst across the European continent over several centuries, and eventually faded from history, but not from myth and memory.

Jordanes, a historian of this Gothic tribe, described the original Scandinavian homeland of the Goths as “the womb of nations” because so

many tribes streamed out of there into Europe during the time of the great migrations.² According to tradition, these tribes, identified largely by their East Germanic dialect, first migrated across the Baltic Sea from Scandinavia to the mouth of the Vistula at the beginning of the Common Era. After two hundred years they made their way southward into what is now Russia, Ukraine, and Romania. In this eastern region after 270 the Goths split into two tribal groups, the Ostrogoths (Shining Goths) and the Visigoths (Wise Goths).³ The Visigoths lived for almost two hundred years directly on the border of the Eastern Roman Empire, as formed by the Danube River.

Some Goths interacted positively with the Romans and became Roman or Arian Christians as they crossed into the Empire. But they remained a minority. The most important figure in the early history of Christianity among the Germanic peoples is Ulfila (311–383). On his mother's side he was the descendant of Cappadocians captured by the Goths in a raid into the Empire in 214. He was raised as a Christian among the Visigoths and went to Constantinople to study the Arian doctrine—which was at that time supported by the Emperor Constantius II. The Arian doctrine is named after Arius of Alexandria who taught this idea around 318. The Arian doctrine contradicted that of the Roman Catholic dogma concerning the Trinity. Arianism stated that the Father preceded the Son, the Son (logically!) emanated from the Father, and the Holy Spirit was a third term in a triad of divinity. This doctrine was officially declared a heresy following the Council of Nicaea (325), but such views continued to live on sporadically in the East for many decades. In any event, most experts on the religion of the early Christian Goths agree that the form of Christianity they practiced was not even true Arianism; instead, it would have been an essentially Gothic form of religion that represented a sort of syncretism between Christian and non-Christian elements in Gothic culture.⁴

Ulfila was made bishop in 341 and undertook a mission among the Gothic peoples as well as other ancient Germanic folk. By 395 most of the Visigothic realm could be characterized as at least nominally Christian. The genius behind Ulfila's mission was his translation of the Christian Bible into vernacular Gothic, the apparent use of popular tunes set to Christian words in the liturgy (also performed in Gothic), and the preservation of other Germanic elements in the Gothic church. The Arian doctrine itself provided the distinction between the Germanic and Roman cultures, which was necessary for the Goths to be able to embrace Christianity at all. In the short

term this was effective, but in the long term it would prove to be the political downfall of the Goths. It should also be noted that the Gothic church observed the sabbath on Saturday, hence the Old High German weekday name *sabaztac* (“sabbath-day”), which found its way into areas of Germany where the Gothic missionary activity was felt. This is why one finds *Samstag* for Saturday in southern Germany today, whereas in the north one hears *Sonnabend*.

As a result of this mission, the Ostrogoths were Christianized (between 405 and 450). Earlier, the other major East Germanic tribes, the Vandals and Burgundians, were nominally converted to Arianism just before 400 CE. Southern Germanic tribes were also affected by the Gothic mission, for example the Alemanni, Bavarians, and Thuringians, although it cannot be said they were Christianized at this time.

Among the Goths themselves this mission was sometimes met with hostile opposition. Between 368 and 372 the Visigothic king Athanaric tried to drive Christianity—both Roman and Arian—out of his kingdom. But the Gothic Christian movement was generally successful due to the aforementioned characteristics instituted by Ulfila. The religion of the Goths was clearly neither orthodox Christianity, nor was it doctrinally bound to Arianism. Although on a superficial level the Goths ceased adhering to traditional Germanic religion, it was essential that they maintained their cultural independence from the Romans. They did this by retaining many features of their native traditions.

The Visigoths migrated from their home north of the Danube through the Balkan peninsula during the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth century. Under their king, Alaric, they sacked Rome in 410, and made their way into southern Gaul and the Iberian peninsula after 418. They first established the kingdom of Toulouse, which lasted until 548. After that, the Visigothic kingdom of Toledo was established in 568/9, which was destroyed in 711 by the Muslim invasion of the Iberian peninsula. The Visigoths, who were vilified as a heretical people, eventually became Roman Catholic under King Reccared in 589.

The Ostrogoths conquered the Italian peninsula in 493 and their king, Theodoric the Great (453/4–526), established the first medieval, post-Imperial, Italian state. He also became king over the Visigoths in 511. He was a brilliant warrior and politician who instituted laws that kept the “Arian” Goths and Roman (Catholic) citizens relatively harmonious, but

separate.⁵ The policy proved to be unsustainable after his death. The success of his political activities, and the fact that his dominant personality overwhelmed Catholic powers in his lifetime, caused a demonic legend to grow up around the circumstances of his death. One legend has him being thrown into a volcano, and hence down to Hell, while another has him being taken off to Hell on demonic horses.⁶ Theodoric was vilified among his “fellow Christians,” yet remained an immortal hero among the traditional Germanic tribes of the north.⁷

The Goths practiced a Germanic form of Christianity which was markedly distinct from that of the Romans. Its exact doctrines and practices remain obscure, however, because most of its documents were destroyed and references to it are vague. For over three centuries the Goths established a precedent for a peculiar form of Christianity admixed with Germanic cultural elements. Although the Goths had no direct historical impact after their ultimate disappearance from ordinary history in 711, their indirect and mythic impact on cultural paradigms in the north is inestimable.

Christianization of the South Germanic Peoples

The South Germanic peoples, also referred to as the West Germanic peoples, include the present-day Germans, Dutch, and Anglo-Saxons. At the dawn of the Middle Ages, the most important groups for the early history of Christianity were the Franks, the Anglo-Saxons (English), and the continental Saxons. It was the Franks in particular who exerted the greatest influence on the early process of Germanizing Roman Christianity.

Apparently the Franks were a coalition of Germanic tribes living on the east bank of the lower Rhine river in the third century CE. The major constituent tribes were the Bructeri, Tencteri, Amisvari, Chamavi, Chattuarii, and Salii. This type of coalition of smaller tribes was just one way in which smaller tribes were *formed* among the Germanic peoples.⁸ In the fourth century the Franks crossed the Rhine and settled in expanding Frankish enclaves west of the Rhine. Many became *foederati* of the Romans, but as the Empire crumbled from within, the Franks increasingly established themselves as the rulers of the northern part of Gaul. This area was eventually renamed *Francia*—land of the Franks, or “France.” The first dynasty of the unified free Franks was the Merovingian. By 490 CE the Franks had established their kingdom north of the river Loire.

Another major tribal group not mentioned in the *Germania* of Tacitus, and which therefore seems to have been formed from other tribal constituents, is that of the Saxons. It is most likely that they coalesced sometime in the second century CE along the coast of the North Sea. The Saxons were sea-raiders from an early date, as is evidenced by the fact the Romans called the defensive fortification system that they established in the North Sea and Atlantic in the late third century the *Litus Saxonicum*. About fifty years after the Romans had evacuated Britain (ca. 400 CE), a concerted effort was mounted by groups of men from among the Saxons, Angles, and Jutes to conquer and colonize the part of Britain that had been abandoned by the Romans. Legend has it that they were invited there by a Brittonic king, Vortigern, to restore order.⁹ This still entirely pagan North Sea Germanic folk began its invasion of Britain in earnest around 450 CE, thus creating what would be called England (*Anglaland*, Land of the Angles). The Angles settled predominantly on the east coast and in central Britain, the Jutes in the far southeast corner, and the Saxons in the south of the island. The Saxons seem to have spearheaded the conquest and it is among the Saxons that a unified English nation arose. These Germanic tribes kept close ties with their points of origin on the continent both before and after Christianization.

There were a host of tribes to the east of the Rhine—some were extremely archaic, such as the Frisians and Chatti, while others had, like the Franks and Saxons, formed more recently as coalescences of smaller, older tribes—the Alemanni and Thuringi were representative of such coalitions. The continental Saxons remained a formidable force in northern Germania.

Christianization of the Franks

One of the most important aspects of the Christianization of the Franks at the end of the fifth century is the fact that they became Roman Catholic rather than Arian. The reasons for this must be sought in contemporary political and military strategies. By around 450 CE, Rome and Roman Christianity were in deep crisis. The doctrinally, and hence politically, independent East Germanic tribes had overrun all of southern Europe and had established their political power over Rome. However, Rome remained important as a source of political prestige. The Franks had been on the rise in northwestern Europe, but were hemmed in on all sides by powerful East Germanic peoples to the south, and vigorous pagan tribes to the east and to the north. The Frank

Clovis (OHG Chlodwig) defeated the last remnants of Roman rule in Gaul in 486, and then turned his attentions toward the still largely pagan Alemanni to the east. The Alemanni were protected by Theodoric the Great. It was during this conflict that Clovis was apparently persuaded, perhaps through the agency of his Roman Catholic wife, Clotilda, to convert to Roman Catholicism. He was baptized on Christmas day of either 496 or 498. This was the first conversion of a Germanic king to the Roman religion, which has to be seen as an institution lying outside the Germanic cultural world. Hence it is from this time that we can truly date the beginning of the significant Christianization, and Romanization, of the Germanic peoples. Over the next two hundred years following the baptism of Clovis, the Franks would be the single most important factor in the conquest and Christianization of other Germanic peoples. However, as has already been noted, the vitality and viability of the Franks made it necessary for “Roman” religion to accommodate them in so many ways that it must also be said that during this time the Romans were perhaps more *Frankicized* than the Franks were actually *Christianized*.

Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons

The pagan Germanic tribes had successfully established themselves over most of the southern two-thirds of the Isle of Britain by around 500 CE. The Anglo-Saxons were not unified at first, but rather formed a loose confederation of independent kingdoms. Traditionally, these were seven in number and called the *Heptarchy*. As for the rest of the regions of the British Isles, they were already at least nominally Christian. The old British church remained established in Wales—a remnant of Roman influence, but politically independent of Rome. In Ireland, and hence Scotland, there was an independent Celtic church. It seems that as much as anything else, the mission of Augustine of Canterbury to the English in 596 was initiated by Pope Gregory I to oppose these Celtic churches, as well as to win the growing political and military power of the English for Rome. In part this was also done in an effort to counterbalance the overwhelming influence of the Franks on the Roman church. There were already isolated Christian churches in England, but the main entrée for the Roman church in England came through the Christian wife of King Ethelbert (OE *Æþelberht*) of Kent. After some five years of work, Augustine persuaded Ethelbert to convert to

Roman Christianity. However, when the king died in 616, the traditional factions in society revolted and ejected the bishops of London and Rochester, who fled to France.

Over the next century Roman Christianity would establish itself in one of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, only to be overthrown by a revolt—usually after the death of the king who had converted. In 633, upon the death of King Edwin of Northumbria, a pagan uprising caused Christian leaders to flee Kent. As with all other Germanic kings, because their power to rule was derived from (1) their royal blood, or genealogy, and (2) the consent of the aristocracy (in the case of the Anglo-Saxons, the *witan*, or council), there was also an underlying antagonism between the king and the church authority with its Roman doctrine. It must be remembered that the Germanic peoples were never conquered by the Romans and so the whole “idea of Rome” held little prestige for them when compared to the place it held in the minds of those peoples who had been part of the Empire in antiquity. It is most likely that all of the Anglo-Saxon kings between about 600 and 700 CE could be described as men of dual faith—both pagan and Christian.¹⁰ King Rædwald of East Anglia (593–617), for example, is recorded as having worshipped both traditional and Christian gods.¹¹ The last great organized resistance to the Christian advance was mounted by the heathen king Penda of Mercia, in alliance with Ethelhere (OE *Æðelhere*), king of the East Angles, and a variety of British “princes.” This resistance was defeated in 654 at the Battle of Winwæd.

By 664 Roman Christianity had become so well established in the Anglo-Saxon realms that it was decided at the Synod of Whitby that Roman rule should extend over all of the British Isles, thus bringing an *official* end to the Celtic churches. For the next century Christianity further consolidated its power in the Anglo-Saxon world. During the course of the 700s, intellectual development in Christian England rivaled that of anywhere else in Christendom. Two products of this world, Boniface (672–754) and Alcuin (735–804), had profound influence on the development of Christianity on the continent. Boniface, a noble Englishman born with the name Wynfrið, worked as an avid anti-pagan missionary in Germany between 719 and his death in 754 (which came at the hands of the Frisians resisting his missionary activity). Alcuin, on the other hand, was invited to the Frankish court of Charlemagne around 781, where he organized the Carolingian renaissance and established the study of the seven liberal arts as a standard educational

curriculum. Charlemagne himself ordered that Frankish heroic lays be collected for preservation, but this material was subsequently destroyed by the next generation.

However, England itself underwent a dramatic partial “re-paganization” near the close of the 700s after the first Viking raid on the monastery of Lindisfarne in 793, which heralded the beginning of a wholesale invasion by heathen Scandinavians from Norway and Denmark. Within fifty years, half of the Anglo-Saxon territory was under pagan Norse control. This situation prevailed for the better part of two hundred years. So before the old gods had been completely forgotten in England they returned, in their Scandinavian forms, to influence English life once again.

The syncretic English-Norse culture that developed between about 800 and 1066 also left a deep mark on the English language. Around one thousand words commonly used in the English vocabulary today are of Norse origin and can be traced back to this time.¹² This testifies to the fact that in the part of England occupied by the Norse, the so-called *Danelaw*, Old English and Norse coexisted and intermingled—as did the people on all cultural levels. In the area once called the Danelaw, over a thousand place names of Norse origin can be found, while over five hundred modern personal names can be traced to Norse roots.¹³

Christianization of the Other South Germanic Tribes

While large parts of the Anglo-Saxon world were undergoing at least partial re-paganization due to the influx of heathen Norwegians and Danes, some Anglo-Saxons participated in the onslaught of Frankish Christendom against the South Germanic tribes east of the Rhine. It was generally the fate of tribes—the Frisians, Saxons, Alemanni, Thuringians, and Bavarians—to be conquered militarily by the Frankish army and thus forcibly Christianized within the Roman fold.

The Frisians were initially conquered in 689 when their army led by King Radbod was defeated. Frisia remained a rebellious and unsettled land for a long time due to its inherently conservative nature. Between 714 and 741 Charles Martel succeeded in subjugating the Alemanni, Thuringians, and Bavarians, and making them part of the Frankish kingdom. The most resistant tribe to Frankish invasions was that of the continental, or Old Saxons. Between 772 and 804 the Frankish king Charlemagne (Charles, or Karl the

Great) fought against the Saxons. Initially, the Franks were successful with the conquest of the Eresburg and the felling of the Irminsûl. The native nobility of the Saxons was forcibly baptized in 772. However, shortly after this occurred there was an uprising led by the free peasants under their leader Widukind. The freemen of Saxony opposed the aristocracy, who had accepted Frankish rule, and with it Christianity. This rebellion was put down in 779–780. But the resistance did not stop. The destruction of a Frankish army in the Süntel mountains in 782 caused the Saxon nobility, who had by that time become Christian under the Franks, to deliver 4,500 free Saxon leaders to Charlemagne, who had them executed near Verden on the Aller river. This did not quell the Saxon revolt, however. From 783–785 the Saxon wars continued. In 785 Widukind accepted baptism, but the armed resistance of the Saxons went on until 804. One method used in pacifying Saxony was the deportation of the native Saxons into Frankish territory, and the settlement of Franks in Saxony. The sustained resistance of the Saxons is a testimony to their tribal solidarity and vitality.

This native vitality made it necessary for Frankish Christianity to make some cultural concessions to the Saxons, just as massive concessions had to be made previously to the Franks by the Roman Christians two hundred years earlier. Details on some of these concessions will be given in [Chapter Four](#), when we will discuss the “Germanization” of Christianity. The Saxons would eventually come to dominate the Holy Roman Empire, which was created on Christmas day 800 with Charlemagne as its first emperor. But just over a century later, from 919 to 1024, the new empire would be ruled by Saxon emperors—which demonstrates just how volatile and unpredictable events were in this period of history.

It might well be noted how political and militaristic the discussion of the Christianization of the Germanic tribes has been. This is because the events were largely driven by political and economic factors; religious conviction played but a small role, except in the cases of certain individuals such as Boniface. “Conversion” of both kings and peasants remained, at best, a superficial affair. The religious life of these new Christians remained syncretized, or mixed, with pagan elements. Additionally, as we will see later, the Frankish influence on the development of medieval Christianity was so great that the Roman rite could have just as easily been dubbed the “Frankish rite.”¹⁴ It is important to keep in mind that the foundations laid in Germany (including the Frankish kingdom of Francia) and England became

the launching pads for the missionizing of the Scandinavians (as well as the Slavs) over the three centuries that followed.

Christianization of the Scandinavians (800–1100)

The Christianizing of the North Germanic peoples constituted the third great phase of a long process that began with the Goths and other East Germanic tribes in the south (332–600), followed by a second phase (600–800) in which the South Germanic tribes of central Europe were at least nominally Christianized. The North Germanic peoples living in what is now Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Iceland remained relatively isolated from the affairs of Europe until around 800. The Scandinavians had interacted with the rest of Europe as ongoing contacts and exchanges were maintained between the far north and other Germanic tribes—many of whom had migrated out of that “hive of nations” centuries earlier. However, geography and events of ancient history kept the Scandinavian world at a safer distance from Imperial politics than was the case with the tribes to their immediate south.

An added complication is that the Scandinavian world was undergoing vital upheavals at roughly the same time as Christianity was pushing against its frontiers. It seemed to the monks of Europe that the fierce Viking raids were aimed directly at them. Scandinavian raiders and traders poured out of the north after about 750 CE. They took one road to the east, which led them as far as Constantinople (Miklagarðr) and Iran (Serkland), and another to the west, which led to the British Isles, France, and, ultimately, to America (Vinland). Although the time between 800 and 1100 is historically referred to as the “Viking Age,” it must be remembered that the term *vikingr* was applied to a man undertaking specific kinds of activities (raiding and trading), usually during specified seasonal periods. They were “Vikings” in foreign lands, but at home they were mostly farmers, poets, and kings, as they always had been.

In Scandinavia the political, strategic, and economic factors in the Christianization process became even more transparent than they had been among the South Germanic peoples. In fact, the influence of Christianity was sometimes foreshadowed by the intrusion of a political institution with which it was closely associated: *monarchy*. For example, shortly before 900 the heathen Norwegian chieftain Harald Fairhair, inspired by the models of power and control exerted by the Christian kings of England and France,

succeeded in making himself the overlord and monarch of a united, independent Norway. After the battle of Hafrsfjord in 885, Harald subdued the independent jarls and exerted monarchical power for the next fifty years. Because the Christian view of theology focused on monotheism (one all-powerful God), its political theory naturally reflected this by idealizing the idea of monarchy (rulership by one centralized vital authority). By the same token, the traditional polytheistic views of divinity were reflected in an idealization of decentralized political power focused on local levels in small tribal kingdoms, and even clan or familial enclaves. As it had been elsewhere, the Christian sponsorship of certain chieftains with monarchical ambitions is an important aspect of the story of the Christianization of Scandinavia. The king would have more personal power at his disposal with the Christian model and, of course, Rome would expand its ecclesiastical empire. Denmark was the first of the Scandinavian countries to become nominally Christian when King Harald Bluetooth was baptized around 965. This had great effect in Norway as the Danish king then controlled much of that region. Although Christianity made some progress in Norway in the tenth century, Norway cannot be called a Christian country until the reign of Olaf Trygvason (995–1000). This development had an enormous impact on Iceland, whose inhabitants were largely of Norwegian origin. Iceland became Christian in the year 1000 (or 999) by “legislative decision” of the Althing, or parliament. The situation was far less well defined in the vast and decentralized countryside of Sweden with its numerous regional foci of political power.

The Christianization of Denmark followed the general European pattern. The Danes had previously been aggressive against Frankish and Christian incursions. They had sacked the city of Hamburg in 845, which forced the church to remove its northernmost bishopric to the more defensible Bremen. The church undertook the task, which it felt was its prerogative, of bringing the pagan Scandinavians (and Slavs) into the Christian fold.¹⁵ More than a century passed before the church achieved any success. Although one Danish king, Harald Kulak, had been baptized in Mainz, Germany, in 826, he was promptly driven into exile by his own people. The conversion of Harald Gormsson (Bluetooth) was the first significant conversion of Scandinavian royalty. This conversion is said to have taken place as a result of an ordeal undergone by a German priest named Poppo. Poppo was able to carry a hot iron bar without being burned as a proof that Christ was a *more powerful*

god than the traditional gods of the Danes. Harald was baptized and did not himself participate in the traditional festivals and rituals.¹⁶ Other members of the nobility continued to worship their own gods. By the turn of the millennium, most nobles had been baptized because Harald had been able to consolidate royal authority in Denmark and link that consolidated power to Christianity.

These events in Denmark had wide-reaching effects because of the far-flung influence of the Danish royal house. In Norway, which was for the most part under Danish domination at this time, Christianity had been making slow progress in royal circles since the reign of Hákon the Good (935–960). Hákon grew up in the Christian court of Ethelstan (OE *Æðelstan*) of England, and was apparently baptized there. Hákon introduced Christianity to Norway by importing priests, but he was not aggressive in his attempts to Christianize the country. This bloody task fell to a later king, and grandson of Harald Fairhair, Olaf Tryggvason. Olaf, who had spent the previous years on Viking raids in the British Isles and who was only baptized late in life, ruled from 995–999/1000. He forcibly Christianized the entire coastal region of Norway, against stiff opposition from the chieftains and wealthy farmers—especially in the northern part of the land. The interior remained heathen. Although Christianity had early success under Hákon the Good, the terrain and decentralized political traditions protracted the consolidation period for Christianity in Norway. Burial customs seem to indicate that pagan customs were already being abandoned in the early tenth century, at a time when they were still being practiced even in Denmark. This can be seen as a testimony to the power of the prestige of foreign style over brute force: the burials were not necessarily actually *Christian*, but they were done in the Christian (English) style.

Iceland never had a king. It has always been a republic. However, foreign kings—of Norway and later Denmark—often exerted influence and even controlled events there. Most of the wealthy landholding Icelandic chieftains (*goðar*) were descended from Norwegian families, and the politics and court-life of the Norwegian kings held great prestige and fascination for Icelanders. One faction of the Icelandic chieftains had been baptized by Þangbrand, a missionary sent by King Olaf. A vote was to be brought before the Althing in the year 1000 concerning the acceptance of Christianity. This required the support of the lawspeaker, who remained true to the traditional gods. After an act of divination, Þorgeirr, the lawspeaker,

decided that all men should have one law (*lög*) and one religion (*siðr*) and that if the law is broken apart, then so too will the peace (*friðr*) be broken apart. In his words can still be heard the living essence of the traditional Germanic desire to preserve group solidarity in spite of everything else. His opponents thirsted for power; he sacrificed his power for the sake of communal *friðr*.¹⁷ As in other places in Scandinavia, Icelandic law allowed for the continued worship of the Germanic gods and other heathen customs to be carried out *in private*. As with all such situations, however, these private freedoms were abolished as soon as the new cultural paradigm was sufficiently entrenched among the majority.

Our knowledge of events in the vast land of Sweden is sparser than for other Scandinavian territories. Christianity came to Sweden at a much slower, and less dramatic, pace than elsewhere. The Christian religion had been known in Sweden throughout the Viking Age as Irish slaves had been allowed to practice their faith in private.¹⁸ However, the first Swedish king to be baptized was Olof Skötkonung. The traditional date for this is 1008, although evidence of Christian coinage shows that the event could have taken place earlier. The apostate Svein regained the Swedish throne and reinstated traditional religions for a period. Christianity and paganism existed side by side all through the eleventh century. Official celebrations were held at the pagan temple at Uppsala until 1080. That temple structure was destroyed in 1100, which is a convenient time to mark the end of official traditional religion in the Germanic world.

The organization of the church in Scandinavia progressed slowly. It was not until the middle of the eleventh century that Danish diocesan organization was complete. Iceland only got its first bishop in 1056. In Sweden, this same level of church organization would not be in place until around 1170.¹⁹ These dates give a truer picture of when the Christianization of the general populaces could have *begun*.

Patterns of Christianization

Although each of the different Germanic tribes and territorial kingdoms were Christianized in slightly different ways, there are certain patterns to be observed. The first of these depends on a *charismatic leader*. Because the Germanic peoples did not tend to have a specialized professional priesthood, the king or chieftain most often fulfilled the role of priest and chief celebrant

of religious sacrifices. It was his link to the gods, by virtue of blood and election by the other leading aristocrats, which bestowed on him his authority and charisma. When and if he was baptized, thus at least in part converting his allegiance and loyalty from his ancestral gods to Christ, the folk who had depended on the efficacy of his spiritual leadership were also converted *de facto*. The idea that the “subjects” of a king or duke or prince *should* be the same religion as their *princeps* was still evident during the time of the Reformation when villages would go from being Catholic to Protestant and back again in a matter of days during the upheavals of the Thirty Years War. Charismatic leadership could also be exercised by Christian leaders such as Ulfila, who won the respect of a people who were without a king.

In principle, the pattern of the charismatic leader hinges on the idea of prestige (in this case, personal prestige). The pattern seen in Iceland, where Christianity was accepted by vote of the Althing, represents another example of the power of prestige, albeit rooted in the legal institutions of the republic. So *legislative decision* must be included as the second major pattern of conversion.

The third pattern was military conquest and thus *coercion*. This pattern was all too common. It is noteworthy that forcible conversion could take one of two forms: either as a conquest from without by a foreign force (e.g., Charlemagne’s conquest of the Saxons) or as an application of tyrannical power by a domestic prince (e.g., Olaf Tryggvason’s campaigns in Norway). Coercive force could also be employed at various times—either as an initial introduction of Christianity or as a way of consolidating Christian power in a territory. Military campaigns would, of course, also often be necessary to quell rebellions by those wanting to return to their traditional ways. Such uprisings were most likely seen by the king as revolts against his authority rather than against Christianity as a religion separate from the political power structure.

In addition to these major patterns of Christianization, there were also a number of institutional techniques that were utilized after the initial widespread and official introduction of Christianity. These involved the role of kingship, the role of the king’s retinue, the way in which the festival calendar was arranged, how ceremonies were performed and the general *quality* of the agents of Christianization and the overall relationship of the north to the rest of Christendom. Some of these themes will be touched on again in the next chapter and will show how much of early medieval

Christianity took on Germanic characteristics. Here, however, we will focus on these themes in the initial Christianization process.

The role of a centralized monarchy in the Christianization of Germania has already been emphasized. In general, many northern warlords were interested in models of social organization that gave them more power. This is what the Christian political theory did, while it also appeared to provide a valuable ally in the form of the Roman church. As time went on, this initial advantage would prove to be a liability. The king took on the role of Christ and his retinue of bodyguards was seen as being parallel with the body of disciples.

The calendar of festivals, sacrifices, and ceremonial occasions was altered to conform to Christian mythology. This transformation had already taken place in the Greco-Roman world, so the form of Christian ceremonial that confronted the Germanic peoples was entirely Roman with little to nothing of a Middle Eastern or Judaic character. The same can be said of the liturgical forms. With the exception of France and England, the northern climes were isolated from the main cultural currents of Europe and as a result the methods of Christianization in those regions were especially superficial. Religious instruction was virtually absent.²⁰ This, among other things, led to the widespread (re-)introduction of traditional, that is, pre-and/or non-Christian, elements into religious practices and beliefs.

In this chapter we have seen how the Christianization of the Germanic peoples was generally a political, military, and economic process rather than a genuinely religious *conversion* or change of heart. As has been intimated in this chapter, and as will be made more explicit in the next chapter, the outworn metaphor which implies that the roots of the ancient, pre-Christian Germanic world were cut off and destroyed by the coming of Christianity is incorrect. The roots were not cut and the tree was not killed when the Irminsûl was destroyed. In fact, the idea that the Germanic peoples as a whole were ever truly *converted* to Christianity in the Middle Ages is apparently false. It was more a case of Christianity being Indo-Europeanized—and subsequently Germanicized in the north—than of Europeans being truly Christianized. As we will see, the most important institutions of the pagan world were simply revalorized in accordance with deeply ingrained indigenous values. At this point the reader may well ask: why, then, is the effort to reawaken the indigenous forms necessary at all? The reason lies in the fact that the revalorizing of Christian forms for the purposes of cultural

expediency introduced a systematic inauthenticity. This progressive counterfeiting of values—turning a pacifistic, initiatory, and soteriological mystery cult based on the rejection of this world into a world-affirming folk religion led by warrior-kings—is a formula for a kind of cultural schizophrenia. Authentic Christianity could not be put in the service of Caesar, nor could it sponsor Crusades, nor could it institute the mass execution of people who did not believe “correctly.” Authentic Christianity is a religion meant only for an elect few within its own cultural milieu. That it has been responsible for numerous such “crimes against humanity” testifies to its schizophrenic quality in Europe. This schizophrenia is a primary cause of the soul sickness of the Western world. The cure for this ailment involves becoming conscious once more of the nature of our own souls, and reawakening to the innate patterns that fulfill our spiritual needs based on our own authentic traditions.

1. See Peter Foote’s article “Conversion” in Pulsiano, ed., *Medieval Scandinavia*, 106–8, and the bibliography there.

2. This famous saying is found in Jordanes’s *Getica*, or *History of the Goths* (IV, 25), where we also see Scandinavia referred to as the “hive of races.” This echoes a statement made earlier in the book (I, 8) that the Goths “burst forth like a swarm of bees.”

3. The oft-heard etymology that labels them “Eastern Goths” and “Western Goths,” respectively, is insupportable on linguistic grounds.

4. For further discussion of these matters, see Vries, *AR*, II, 406–13.

5. This political and religious situation is delineated in detail in Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, 327–72.

6. For a brief overview of these legends, see Haymes and Samples, *Heroic Legends of the North*, 26, 33.

7. In an exhaustive study of the runic inscription on the ninth-century Swedish Rök stone, Höfler (*Der Runenstein von Rök und die germanische Individualweihe*, 9ff, 257ff, 271ff) demonstrates how the legends surrounding Theodoric the Great actually replaced certain Odinic paradigms.

8. For an exhaustive study of the various ways in which Germanic tribes were constituted and formed, see Wenskus, *Stammesbildung und Stammesverfassung*.

9. This “legend” is recounted by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his *Historia Regnum Britanniae* (VI, 10), conveniently translated by Lewis Thorpe (see Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, 155–57).

10. One of the most important studies for the understanding of this concept and historical reality, especially as regards the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy, is Chaney, *The Cult of Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England*.

11. Vries, *AR*, II, 416.

12. See McCrum, Cran, and MacNeil, *The Story of English*, 71 et passim, and, more generally, Geipel, *The Viking Legacy*.

13. For more details on these aspects of the influence of the Norse language in England, see Geipel, *The Viking Legacy*, 110ff and 165ff.

14. Russell (*The Germanization*, 141–44 et passim) succinctly outlines various liturgical influences of Germanic practice on the Roman rite.
15. See Foote, “Conversion,” 106.
16. Foote, “Conversion,” 106–7.
17. For a study of this term in its cultural context, see Grönbech, *The Culture of the Teutons*, I, 32–63 et passim.
18. For example, we know that Ansgar made an assembly of already Christian slaves (mostly Irish) in Birka where he was allowed to preach around 830 CE. See the *Vita S. Anskarii*, chap. XI.
19. This and many other details of the history of the events surrounding the Christianization of Scandinavia are outlined in Sawyer and Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia*, 108–9.
20. See Russell, *The Germanization*, 135.

Chapter IV

Ages of Darkness

The Medieval Submersion and Assimilation of Germanic Culture

The inception of the so-called Middle Ages begins with the official acceptance of Christianity: from that point on and continuing to the time of what is conventionally called the Renaissance, it can be said that the culture is *medieval*. The Renaissance is generally characterized as the beginning of the Modern Age.¹ Hence, the historical meaning of the phrase “Middle Ages” indicates that this time is sandwiched between the Ancient and Modern periods. For the general history of Europe, the medieval period is usually identified as occurring between 400–1450 CE. For the Germanic world, the beginning date will often be as much as 600–700 years later. It can also be said that the Middle Ages constitutes the time when Christendom dominated all aspects of established culture in an unquestioned way. Therefore, we might expect that the medieval period would be particularly inhospitable to the interests that motivate this study. However, such is not really the case. In the medieval world there is an unrecognized continuity of traditional elements. These elements were, due to pressures from orthodoxy, most often camouflaged behind apparently Christian forms. The story of the Middle Ages is not so much the story of the reawakening of Germanic culture as it is the story of a long and dreamy twilight between wakefulness and sleep.

Medieval Europe was a complex world. It was a synthesis of many cross-currents of culture. That the synthesis was often awkward, or achieved only after a good deal of friction, is not as surprising as the fact that it was also achieved with a considerable amount of grace. In any given national culture—be it Italian, French, English, or German—the medieval synthesis encompassed six major elements.

These six elements are arranged in two triads. The first triad is made up of the various political and economic spheres: (1) the church, embodied in the monastic establishments and in the cathedrals; (2) the royal or feudal estates and courts; and (3) the towns. The church was supported by the royal society militarily and economically, while its own support of the royal houses ensured their legitimacy. Nevertheless, the royal estate operated in a way that was often culturally independent of the church. The relationship between the church and the royal estate was always fraught with ambiguities and friction. The source of that friction can clearly be traced back to the fact that royal authority was originally derived from indigenous or autochthonous sources, whereas the church implies that all political power is derived “from God” (more specifically, the Christian God) and the church reserves its prerogative as the sole arbiter of God’s will on earth. As it is the king’s duty to rule on earth in the secular world, and as the secular world is obviously placed in a subordinate position to the Roman ecclesiastical establishment as the arbiter of the celestial will, the king is theoretically made subservient to the church. This situation never sat well with the royal secular authorities—especially in those areas of Europe that had never been brought into the Roman Empire in the ancient period.

A second triad of elements is comprised of the various intellectual or spiritual roots of the culture: (1) Christian doctrine and learning; (2) classical learning, especially in the form of Latin language and literature; and (3) national traditions. Christian literature and doctrine naturally provided the intellectual template for the establishment and continuance of Christendom. Scripture, commentaries, and the writings of early Christian theorists (called “Church Fathers”) all had to be taught, preserved, and transmitted. These teachings provided Christian clerics with their *raison d’être*. But this intellectual culture was highly dependent upon pagan classical learning. The sacred languages of Christendom were Greek and Latin, and the masters of the Latin language happened to be pagans such as Caesar, Cicero, and Tacitus. Therefore, the texts of these masters were preserved and continually recopied for their grammatical and stylistic flourishes rather than for their content. Well into the Middle Ages, many of the more humanistic Christian thinkers often (if secretly) read and valued the pagan Roman sources to a much greater degree than their orthodoxy might have allowed. The Latin language was also used to encode the various laws and documents of an official nature generated in the secular court. In that court, however, a wholly other kind of culture also blossomed. This was the venue in which the old national traditions were continued and cultivated in the vernacular languages (English, German, etc.). Here, sometimes in the guise of “entertainment,” the heroic mythology of the native traditions was preserved. The preservation of these traditions was a vital necessity to the royal court—to keep its ancient connections intact and somehow conscious and to motivate men-in-arms to adhere to a heroic

code of honor, loyalty, and courage. This is the milieu in which works such as the Arthurian romances, the tales of the search for the Holy Grail, and the national epics inherited from pre-Christian sources, such as *Beowulf* or the *Nibelungenlied*, were kept alive and vital to the functioning of society.

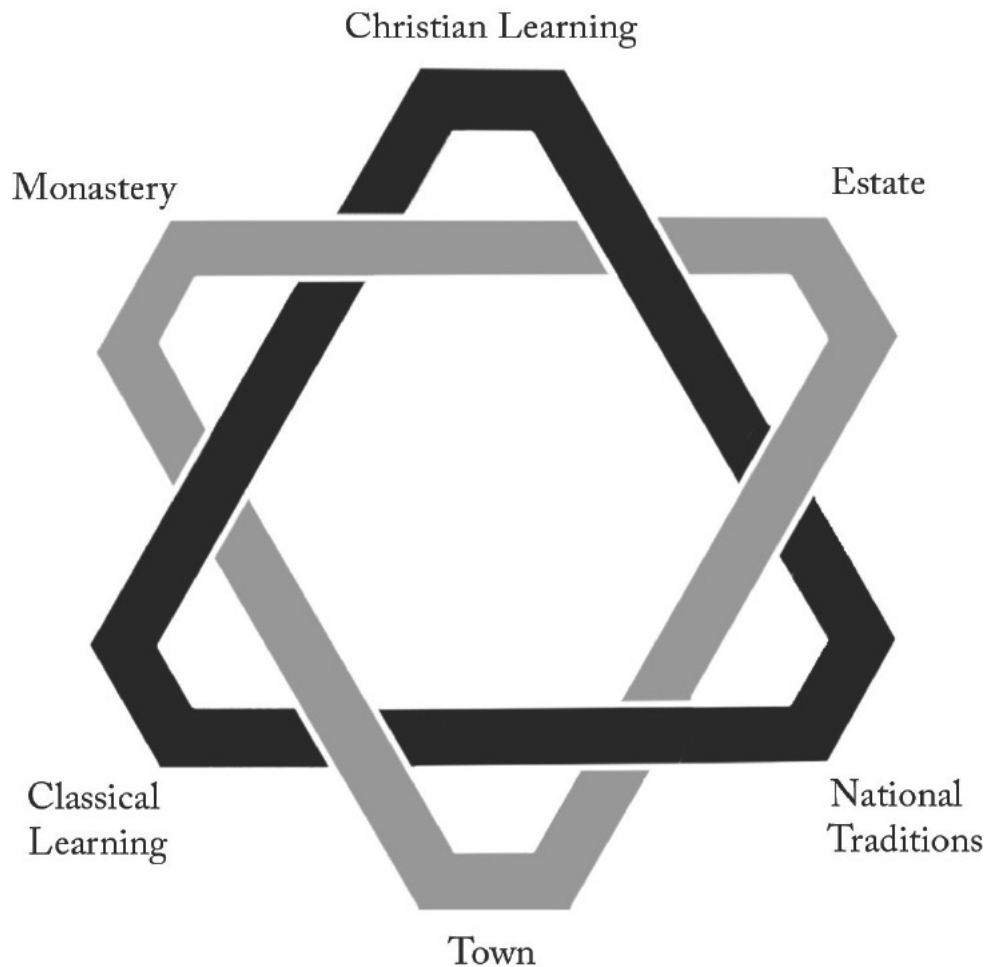


Fig. 4.1: The Hexad of Medieval Culture

These six features taken together form a hexad of medieval culture, as shown in [Figure 4.1](#). These elements were no less present and active in northern Europe than they were throughout the rest of Europe.

Peculiar characteristics of the Middle Ages in the north were that the monastic culture was an imported culture from the British Isles, and that Christian learning did not perhaps penetrate as deeply because of an initial lack of prestige from Rome and things Roman among the northern populace. Conversely, the national traditions were relatively stronger and had a clearer identity than they did elsewhere.

Certain key events or trends shaped the medieval world in the Germanic north. After an initial period of uncertainty and conquest (600–800), the Holy Roman Empire was founded on Christmas day 800. Charlemagne (Karl the Great) was the first emperor. However historians might judge this empire (said to be neither “holy,” nor “Roman,” nor an “empire”), the myth began to grow that the full majesty and importance of the old Roman Empire (the last emperor of which had died in 476 CE) had been fully reborn in the Holy Roman Empire. The idea would take centuries to be absorbed, but eventually it was felt that Germany and the German emperor were *just as Roman* as Rome itself. This idea would have dire consequences. Another important factor is the beginning of the great split between the southern Germanic world (Germany and England) and Scandinavia. The former was largely converted by 800, while the latter would not be fully Christianized until around 1100. One of the effects of this was that the southern Germanic region tended to be cut off from its indigenous heritage more thoroughly than was the case in the rest of the north.

One of the great periods in the Middle Ages for northern Europe was the time leading up to 1200 and shortly thereafter. This has been called the twelfth-century renaissance. Notable achievements of this renaissance include the composition of the *Nibelungenlied* in the south and the work of Snorri Sturluson in the north. This was also a time of significant political unity under the Hohenstaufen dynasty (1152–1268). As far as learning and interest in antiquities is concerned, it would not be until the era of humanism at the close of the Middle Ages that similar achievements might be noted again.

Throughout the medieval period, cultural elements from the indigenous national cultures were being assimilated, or syncretized, with nascent Christendom. This created a certain degree of continuity from the pre-Christian past. The concept of cultural continuity has caused a good deal of controversy.² However, for our study it is of only secondary importance as to whether one wishes to see the composition of the *Nibelungenlied* around 1200 as an example of continuity or revival. The same question surrounds the medieval political and economic system of feudalism, which seems to have been based on pre-Christian, or even pre- or non-Roman models of social organization. This in turn leads to similar questions about the social evolution from the ancient heroic-aristocratic ethos to the chivalric-knightly ethos of the later Middle Ages. In any event, the main venue of the medieval process of assimilation and accommodation of pagan and Christian ideas was the royal courts—although, as we shall see, the church itself was by no means excluded. The missing part of the puzzle that would clarify these questions is the folkloristic, oral tradition, which by definition left no hard evidence behind. The *Nibelungenlied* begins with the verse: *uns ist in alten mæren / wunders vil geseit* (“in old tales many wonderful things are told to us”). These “old tales,” which were *told*, must refer to the oral tradition underlying the written record—and only now and again surfacing from the depths to let us know it is still there.

The Germanization of Christianity

A good deal was written in the previous chapter on the process of the Christianization of the traditional Germanic cultures. Many of the shortcomings, or failings, of this process were noted. However, the degree to which this was as much a process of the Germanization of Christianity as it was the Christianization of the Germanic world has not been sufficiently emphasized. One of the things which emerges from an examination of the medieval period is the degree to which traditional features and cultural patterns were *preserved*—thus obviating the necessity to *reawaken* these patterns. For some, it may sound like an unexpected twist that in fact the medieval period—the age in which Christianity seemed to exercise its greatest cultural hegemony—should in fact be a time when heathen elements were largely retained. Of course, most overtly heathen material was strictly suppressed at this time, which necessitated its being wrapped in a Christian garb.

In theory the reason why this Germanization took place is that it was necessary to the success of the church. Without such accommodations, the Christian mission would have failed in Europe. Because Christianity first emerged from the unstable urban social environment of the Mediterranean, it was not naturally suited to what James Russell describes as the “rural, warrior-dominated, pastoral-agricultural society with a high level of group solidarity” that characterized Germanic culture. When comparing the situation in modern Japan, where Christianity has had little success, to that of medieval Europe, where Christianity had difficulty penetrating to the north, James Russell notes:

A strong sense of social unity and collective security also prevailed among the Germanic peoples in the early Middle Ages. Although they may have been less culturally sophisticated than the contemporary Japanese, like them, the Germanic peoples did not have immediate social or spiritual needs which Christianity might fulfill. Also the homogeneity of early medieval Germanic society, like that of contemporary Japan, did not predispose it to the Christian message. Christianity tends to flourish in heterogeneous societies in which there exist high levels of anomie, or social destabilization.³

Anomie can be further described as a “state of social disorganization in which established social and cultural forms break down.”⁴ Anomie prevailed in the collapsing Roman Empire, and Christianity flourished. However, such anomie was lacking among the Germanic tribes. Therefore, the social and cultural patterns of the traditional Germanic tribal world had to be accommodated. Preaching and coercion proved ineffective in the long run and so syncretism increasingly became the key to Christian success. This accommodation was perhaps thought to be a temporary measure, but the vitality of traditional Germanic culture, combined with the church’s lack of instructional resources, led to the heavy Germanization of Christianity itself.

Specifically, this Germanization process manifested in a variety of cultural features within medieval society, such as the dramatic-representational interpretation of scripture and liturgy overshadowing the soteriological-

eschatological essence of early Christianity, the development of local *Eigenkirchen* (churches owned by Germanic lords), chivalry, feudalism, the crusader ideology, and the cult of relics.⁵

Russell also notes that the Roman Christian ritual or liturgy was progressively Germanized from about 600 to 1100 CE.⁶ Citing Jungmann (*The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origin and Development*, vol. I), Russell points to a number of Germanic influences on the liturgical culture of Christianity. These include: a decrease in Christ's role as a divine mediator; an increase in votive masses commemorating Mary and the saints; a multiplication of the signs of the cross; the introduction of silent prayer with folded hands (developed from the posture of a vassal pledging loyalty to his lord); increased dramatic and allegorical representations of the events of Christ's life; a weekly liturgical cycle; a decrease in soteriological-eschatological aspects; the emergence of a *Christmas* (Yule) ritual cycle in response to the Easter-cycle; and an increased stratification between the clergy and the laity (e.g., a "rail" is introduced in the church to separate these two groups).⁷ Such examples could be multiplied.

These Germanic influences came primarily from the Franks. It is the Franks who became the standard-bearers of Roman Christianity (and the tribal epicenter for the new "Roman" empire). The emphasis on Frankish power may have hindered the success of Christianity among other rival Germanic tribes. However, for the Franks as well as their Germanic rivals, the chief emphasis on, and interest in, Christianity seemed to relate to the worldly power of the Christian/Roman God to intervene in earthly affairs and most especially to give victory in war. Christianity was equated with a magico-religious cult, similar in kind to the indigenous Germanic cult, but thought to be exoterically more powerful.⁸ According to Russell, neither did the Anglo-Saxon missionaries to Germany emphasize ideas of salvation or apocalypse: "Instead, seeking to appeal to the Germanic regard for power, they tended to emphasize the omnipotence of the Christian God and the temporal rewards he would bestow upon those who accepted him through baptism and through conformity to the discipline of the Church."⁹

The process of the Germanization of Christianity is perhaps best summarized by Russell when he writes:

Instead of directly confronting this opposing value system and attempting to radically transform it—an approach which almost certainly would have resulted in an immediate rejection of Christianity—the missionaries apparently sought to redefine the Germanic virtues of strength, courage, and loyalty in such a manner that would reduce the incompatibility with Christian values, while at the same time "inculturating" Christian values as far as possible to accommodate the Germanic ethos and world-view.¹⁰

Elements of the Reawakening

Given this state of affairs in the early medieval period, it should come as no surprise that our interest for this study is drawn as much to the concept of the *preservation* of Germanic cultural features in this period as it is to any attempt to reawaken them. The *desire* element is therefore bifurcated between preservation and continuity on the one hand, and revival or reawakening on the other. For the first few centuries of the Germanic Middle Ages (ca. 600–1100), the emphasis was almost entirely on the idea of preserving traditional forms within an externally Christianized shape.

The *freedom* to engage in overt heathen forms of culture and practice was severely limited during this period. The most limiting restrictions were perhaps unconsciously imposed from within. Psychologically, most people living in the Middle Ages were probably consciously trying to be Christians. However, due to the lack of formal instruction and the overwhelming vitality of the traditional Germanic culture, the deeper paradigms of paganism were generally retained. The freedom to engage in heathen patterns of behavior and thought was generally promoted in the culture of the secular royal courts. These had derived their original authority from pre-Christian sources, and so had a vested interest in preserving the structural elements of that culture. One of the chief factors in the eventual degeneration of the vital heathen paradigms of the Middle Ages lies in the precipitous decline in the preservation of texts supporting the earlier culture. The oral traditions died hard, but were eventually almost entirely replaced by scribal learning. Needless to say, this scribal tradition was controlled by the church and the *scriptoria* in its monasteries. The general loss of heathen texts—oral or written—in the north would be a major stumbling block to any future renaissance. Iceland would form the only general exception to this unfortunate rule.

The *methods* used for the preservation and eventual renaissance of heathen forms in the Middle Ages were in themselves extremely traditional. That is, the heathen paradigms of the "past" were not necessarily treated as objects from bygone days to be studied and consciously engaged with. Rather, they remained part of the subjective fabric of culture to be enacted and reenacted *from within*. Even at the time of the renaissance of the heroic-aristocratic cultural patterns around 1200, these paradigms were not overtly treated as distant objects but rather as living, contemporary realities.

Medieval Descent into Darkness

When we look at individual Germanic cultures and how each responded to the influx of Christianity, we see both stout inner resistance based on vital cultural patterns and the slow disintegration of these patterns. Christian ideas were assimilated from the outside inward. At first, traditional meaning still informed the Christian symbols, but eventually the Christian meaning would slowly but surely penetrate. This heathen/ Christian syncretism, which prevailed in the European Middle Ages, is no different in principle from the religious creoles found in the Caribbean today. Despite the fact that we will be confronted with patterns of obfuscated preservation more often than overt renaissance in this period, the application of the analytical cultural lens of law, literature, religion, language, and material culture will still prove revealing.

The Goths

The Goths, who rose and fell in an age before Christianity was fully established in other Germanic tribal areas, still provide some interesting examples of how Germanic culture interacted with early Christendom. Because the Goths do not form a continuous culture with the present, and because they earned such high—virtually mythic—esteem among the many Germanic tribes to the north, they early on become the object of cultural reflection among other Germanic tribes. When we look to medieval Gothic history itself, spanning from the time of their earliest Christianization in the fourth century to their official historical demise in 711, we see not a tale of revival, but of the preservation of autochthonous Germanic cultural elements.

The *law*, or political practices, of the Goths seem conspicuous for their Germanic features. Gothic identity was strongly preserved among a significantly large group of freemen (between one-fifth and one-half of the male population) who enjoyed equal legal rights. This group of “notables” bore the mantle of Gothic identity as the Goths interacted with non-Gothic and non-Germanic peoples such as the Romans, Alans, and Huns. Their feeling of being Gothic and their sense of Gothic solidarity transcended individual career paths. Many individual Goths left their tribe after they had been bested for leadership roles and took up positions in the Roman army. Some became generals in the Empire. However, they would sometimes desert the Romans or simply return to the Goths if their families needed them in their conflicts with Rome.¹¹ Clearly, in a legal and social sense the Goths continued to maintain a separate group solidarity throughout their history. Theodoric’s famous legal code—which legally segregated Roman Christians from Gothic Arians in a sort of early medieval apartheid—is just one more manifestation of Gothic ethnic solidarity.¹² Other legal continuities from the pre-Christian period include the public swearing of oaths and regular land allocations and donations overseen by royal authority. Royal authority itself was responsible to the freemen and aristocracy, from whose consent the royal authority was derived. “[R]oyal power, according to the Germanic concept of government, is never above the law, but always subject to its rules. ‘The royal power, like the whole people’ we read in the *Forum Iudicum*, an early Visigothic law code, ‘is bound to observe the laws.’”¹³

Although we have a significant body of Gothic texts, they are all Christian. The literary tradition of the Goths is therefore limited to references to Latin and Greek texts. The most important single piece of literary-historical evidence is the *Getica* of Jordanes (551).¹⁴ Although written in Latin, the author was himself a Goth. This leads us to think he was reflecting a variety of native beliefs and traditions in his historical narrative. Jordanes closes his book with the apology that the work was created not “so much to the [Goths’] praise as to the glory of [Belesarius] who conquered them.”¹⁵ However, this apology must have seemed necessary to the author because he did write so much that was positive concerning the Goths and their traditional history. Barely beneath the surface of the text of the *Getica* is a document which records with pride the accomplishments and traditions of the heathen as well as Arian Goths. The Goths are extolled as being “wiser than any other barbarians” (V, 40) and Jordanes brags that the Romans were never able to conquer the pagan Goths (XI, 67). This “national,” or *tribal*, pride and preservation of indigenous myths is characteristic of the way heathen traditions were carried on in a Christian context. Another renowned historian and ethnographer, Isidore of Seville (570–636), was also known for his pro-Gothic statements.

The *religion* of the Christian (Arian) Goths was itself a symbolic tool used to keep their ethnic and linguistic identity separate from the Romans. Arian doctrine was perhaps of little real importance in the spiritual lives of individual Goths or in that of the collective elite. Burns states: “The tenacity of the religious patterns stemming from paganism is apparent throughout the history of the Ostrogoths, despite their conversion to Arian Christianity.”¹⁶ Most scholars seem to agree that the Goths were never fully Christianized.¹⁷ Arianism, with its lack of emphasis on the monotheistic dogma might have appealed to the polytheistic sensibilities of the pagan Goths, but even this may take the discussion of religious doctrine too far. Theology seems to have been of interest only to a small minority of clerics among the Goths. The majority of the folk, both noblemen and commoners, remained unconcerned. They seem

to have carried on many of the old traditions, with the names and external symbols increasingly changed to fit a new “style.” But the substance appears to have remained Gothic. Unfortunately for us, this conclusion is derived from sketchy evidence and comparative models. What helps make us certain of the conclusion, however, is the fact that there is very little in the way of contradictory evidence. Some examples of this pagan continuity should suffice to demonstrate its prevalent nature.

When Ulfilā invented the Gothic alphabet for purposes of writing his translation of the Bible, he apparently used the old runic letter names to designate the new letters. Among these names are *aza* (< Go. **ansus* < PGmc. **ansuz*, “ancestral sovereign god”), *tyz* (< Go. **teiws* < PGmc. **tīwaz*, “sky god”), and *enguz* (< Go. **iggws* < PGmc. **ingwaz*, “earth-god”). To modern sensibilities these clearly pagan appellatives would seem out of place in a system created by and for Christian purposes. But in the actual Gothic realm these distinctions were not so strictly maintained. The “Christian” Goths carried on with their pagan funerary practices. Article 22 of the *Acts of the Synod of Toledo* (589), which formalized the conversion of the Visigoths to Roman Christianity, prohibits the Goths from singing their customary funerary songs in favor of the Psalms.¹⁸ Apparently, traditional funeral practices had been used among the Goths as long as two hundred years after their formal Christianization. Gothic funeral rites included a solemn procession, songs of praise and songs of lament, the riding of horses around the grave, drinking of a ritual toast at the grave, and a memorial at the Yule- or Christmas-time.¹⁹ Ambrosius mentions (*Epistola* 20, 12) that the Christian Goths have “churches” on carriages or wagons—which must also be a holdover from the pagan age of the migrations. The continuing importance of blood-vengeance, too, would seem to be a continuation of pre-Christian practice. Blood-vengeance was a motivating factor in some of Theodoric the Great’s historical actions.²⁰

The language of the Goths provided a significant strand of cultural continuity through the centuries. Ulfilā, by translating the Bible into vernacular Gothic, created a linguistic monument for future generations of scholars, but more important for the Goths was the measure of legitimacy it conferred upon their native language. Gothic could be used in court, but also in church. This is one more factor that kept the Goths and Romans separate and ensured the Gothic sense of solidarity and independence from Roman culture.

In the area of material culture, the Goths left behind only a small sampling of their archaic traditions. This small quantity is, however, conspicuous for its remarkable qualities. Among the most common specifically Gothic artifacts are the many eagle fibulae (Fig. 4.2) that were probably royal donations²¹ and signs of a connection to royal power. The symbol of the eagle may have been introduced to the Goths by the Romans or Huns²²—although later Germanic mythic iconography is rich in images of eagles.²³ The famous tomb of Theodoric the Great in Ravenna seems to be a Romanesque architectural effort to imitate the traditional Germanic grave-mound. (Of course, the Goths knew nothing of the so-called “Gothic” architecture of the High Middle Ages.) The specifically Arian Gothic church structures such as the basilica of Sant’Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna are only distinguished by their emphasis on royal power in connection with religion. The actual manuscript of the Gothic Bible (*Codex Argenteus*) may be an expression, in those specifically Gothic letters, of the sacred and awesome reverence for the written word the Goths inherited from their pagan ancestors. This book is now housed in the university library in Uppsala, Sweden. It was bought by seventeenth-century humanists in the belief that it was indeed a relic from northern antiquity. A final example of medieval Gothic material culture is provided by the remarkable Visigothic treasure of Fuente de Guarrazar. This consists of various gold artifacts including several magnificent jewel-encrusted crowns that had belonged to the Visigothic kings of Toledo.²⁴



Fig. 4.2: Gothic Eagle (Cesena, Italy, 5th century)

After the official demise of the Goths in Europe in 711, their name and cultural prestige continued to be important to many European nations throughout the Middle Ages. There is the well-known example of the Swedish and Spanish delegates to the Council of Basel (1431–49) vying with each other over matters of their respective ranks based on their links to Gothic antiquity. This also inspired other delegates to investigate their connections with the Goths. The Spanish nobility never relinquished its symbolic ties to its Gothic heritage.²⁵ This is not surprising, as the Visigoths had been responsible for the establishment of the first Spanish national culture in the form of the kingdom of Toledo. Italy, which by contrast had been reconfigured as a post-Imperial medieval kingdom by the Ostrogoths, forgot its Gothic legacy much earlier.

The Goths assumed mythic proportions in antiquity and their myth only grew as they receded into the distant past. Because of their legendary status they will play a significant role in the history of the reawakening of Germanic mythic patterns in later centuries. They are a special case, however, as there are no direct representative descendants of the Goths. As no one can claim to *be* Gothic, all of Germanic culture and aesthetics would come to be labeled as “Gothic.” What is most noteworthy about the Goths is the fact that they never seem to have been fully Christianized, although documentation about their culture is sparse. The same cannot be said for one of the historical rivals of the Goths—the Franks.

The Franks

Because of the important role of the Franks in the Christianization of the other Germanic tribes, especially those east of the Rhine, their place in history is well documented. The vital strengths of the Franks in the areas of politics and religion often demonstrate features inherited from their heathen past and continued in the Christian period.

The laws of the Franks (*Pactus Legis Salicae*),²⁶ first collected and encoded by Clovis somewhere between 507 and 511, preserved more Germanic characteristics than any other medieval Germanic law code, with the exception of the Anglo-Saxon laws. Traces of this customary Germanic code were retained in northern France up to the time of the French Revolution (1789).²⁷ The specifically Germanic characteristics identifiable in this code of law are its *customary* (rather than written or legislative) nature, with legal matters not determined by judges but rather by “men from the community specifically designated to speak the law—the *rachimburgi*”;²⁸ the use of compurgation (oath-swearing) and ordeal to settle legal disputes; the idea that even “criminal” cases were handled as civil injuries

(usually compensated for by means of monetary payment to the injured party); general property rights for women; and the idea that all children inherit property equally. This latter feature would be responsible for the division of the kingdom into three parts, which accounts for aspects of the modern European political map, with France in the west, Germany in the middle, and Austria (the eastern realm) in the east. Frankish civil law also allowed for divorce and did not rule out polygamy.

These examples could be multiplied. What is important to realize is that the secular realm of the king inherited its theoretical structure from principles established in pre-Roman and pre-Christian times. In the earliest period the king was fairly weak—with most power held by the aristocracy. This led to the demise of the Merovingian dynasty, as it was forced out of power by the meritorious rise of the aristocratic class known as the *majores domo*.

The ancient organizational principle of the lord's retinue (*comitatus*)—a warrior band sworn in loyalty to the king or prince—was used as a model for the creation of the Frankish state and for a new form of economic and social organization: feudalism. The word “feudalism” is derived from Germanic **fehu-ōd-*, which became the basis for medieval Latin *feudum*, “(feudal) estate.” This is a reference to an archaic mode of managing land in a system of mutually binding obligations of loyalty between a lord and his vassals, or retainers. Authority to manage the land was divided and subdivided, as was the land itself. This system would be employed in one form or another well into modern times.

In the early years of Frankish history, the language of the aristocracy remained Germanic/Frankish, but by the High Middle Ages it had become Latinized as Old French—the ancestor of the modern Romance language, French. Literature in Old Frankish is extremely sparse and almost all of it consists of translations from Latin religious texts. Histories, such as Gregory of Tours' *History of the Franks* (ca. 591), were written in Latin, and provide little in the way of legendary material. However, works such as those of Gregory or the biographies of Charlemagne written by Einhard (ca. 836) and Notker (ca. 894) provide a good picture of the heroic-aristocratic code of the Germanic Franks of the Merovingian and Carolingian dynasties. As conscious products of the Christianization process itself, these texts give only vague hints as to the aristocratic efforts to preserve archaic aspects of heroic culture. For example, Einhard (*Vita Karoli Magni*, III, 29) informs us of Charlemagne's efforts to retain and expand the use of the Germanic Frankish language and provides the Frankish month-names that the Emperor had instituted. These include *ostarmanoth* (Easter-month = April) and *heilagmanoth* (holy-month = December), both of which indicate the continuation of older Germanic ideas. In the same section, Einhard also tells us that Charlemagne “directed that the age-old narrative poems, barbarous enough, it is true, in which were celebrated the warlike deeds of the kings of ancient times, should be written out and so preserved.”²⁹ This collection, which probably constituted something like a Frankish *Edda*, was burned by Charlemagne's successor, Ludwig (the Pious). Only fragments of this material remain, such as the *Ludwigslied* (ninth-century Rhine-Frankish), which commemorates the victory of Ludwig III over the Normans at Saucourt in 881.

More important than these bits and pieces are the Old French *chansons de geste* (songs of heroic deeds), like the *Chanson de Roland* (Song of Roland). This work was probably composed in its present form around 1100, but harkens back to the time of Charlemagne and his campaigns against the invading Muslims in the region of the Pyrenees (777–778). These *chansons de geste* reflect the heroic-aristocratic ethos of the Frankish elite, and their very existence testifies to a continuing oral tradition within the king's court.

As far as religion itself is concerned, the Germanizing influence of the Franks on the structure of early medieval Christianity has already been noted in [Chapter Three](#). The Franks were the main instigators of the Germanization of the Roman church. They appear to be responsible for the gesture of the “cross” which was perhaps a reflection of an earlier “hammer-sign.” The emphasis on Christmas as the most holy time of the year, as the heathen Yuletide had been, is also a Frankish innovation. Moreover, the martial influx into Christian ideology seems to have been largely founded on the warlike spirit of the Franks—and France was to remain the main military center of Christendom throughout the Middle Ages.

The Frankish language left only about ten percent of its vocabulary in the modern French language. In the Middle Ages, however, Frankish was necessary for the translation of Germanic law into Latin. Therefore words such as *thunginus* (“hundredman,” an officer of the court), *chrenecruda* (“responsibility of kin to aid their kinsman”), *lidi* (“half-free”), *rachimburgi* (“law-speakers”), and dozens of other words had to be borrowed into medieval Latin to facilitate the institutionalization of Germanic legal concepts. Germanic personal names also spread in popularity and prestige throughout Europe following this period. That is why names such as Karl, Heinrich, Friedrich, or Ludwig find reflections in Romance language forms such as Carlo, Enrique, Frederico, or Louis, respectively.

Frankish material culture has left behind only scattered remnants. The most significant of these is perhaps the golden grave goods from the tomb of the fifth-century king Childeric at Tournai.³⁰ These were found in 1653, although most were stolen in 1831 and never recovered. These objects show rich cloisonné work of red garnet in gold and make use of the bird-of-prey motif so common in heathen Germanic art (see [Fig. 4.3](#)).

Autochthonous Germanic values were not only widely preserved among the Franks, they were also disseminated and established beyond the borders of Germania. It has been noted that between the sixth and eleventh centuries, the Roman Catholic liturgy might more accurately have been described as the Germanic rather than the Roman Rite.³¹

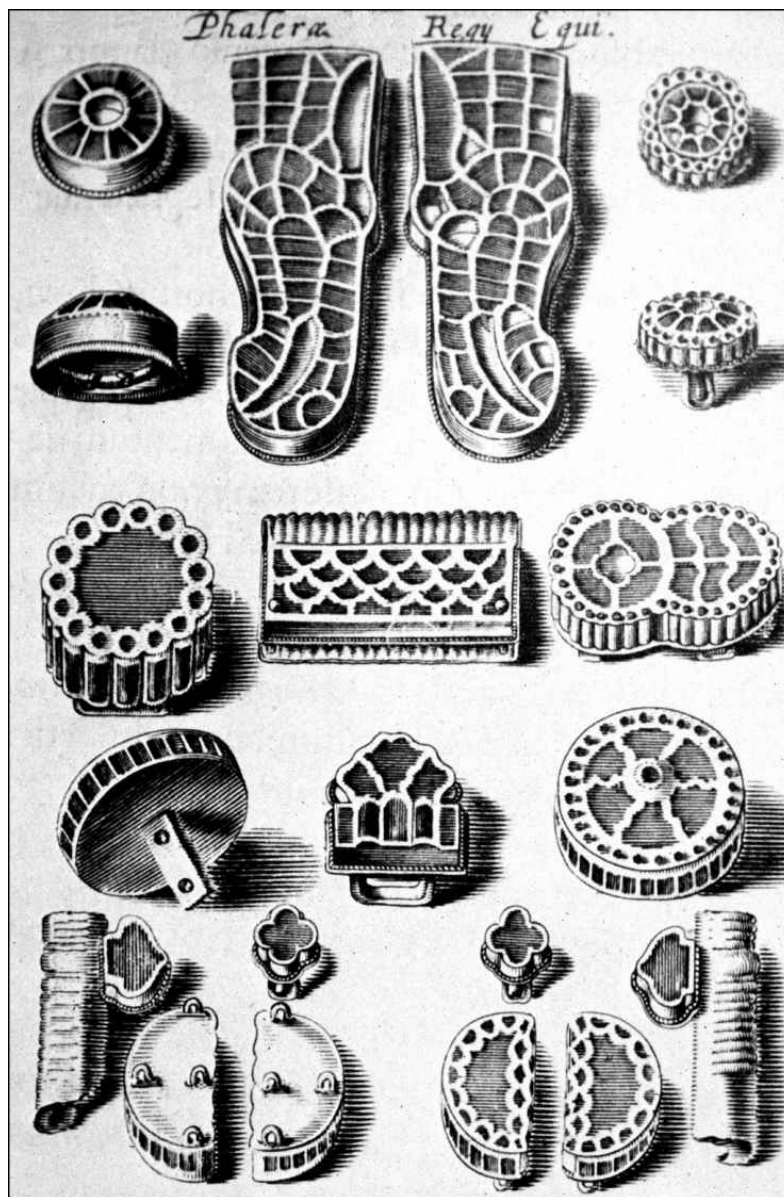


Fig. 4.3: Drawings of the Treasure of Childeric

The cultural vitality of the Franks and other Germanic tribes of the early Middle Ages demanded accommodation by the often decrepit Romano-Christian culture. The Romano-Christian system promised prestige to kings and warlords and promoted a political theory that rationalized an increased level of personal power at the expense of the indigenous aristocracy. This latter feature made Roman Christianity attractive to many up-and-coming war-leaders and kings.

The Saxons and Other Continental Germanic Tribes

Several Germanic tribes east of the Rhine and north of the Danube were subdued and nominally Christianized during the reigns of Charles Martel ("the Hammer") and Charlemagne (Karl the Great) between about 714 and 814. By the tenth century, the cultures of Alemannia, Bavaria (which includes modern Bavaria and Austria), Thuringia, and

especially Saxony had embraced the Frankish mode of Christendom to the extent that the epicenter of Charlemagne's Germanic Empire had moved from Francia to Saxony. This meant that for the first time the myth of Rome had moved beyond the borders of the original Roman Empire and into the "barbarian" world. Some three to four centuries later, in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, these areas would be the epicenter of the first true reawakening of Germanic culture. We can trace this renaissance through the evidence it left behind in literature—the Nibelungen cycle and the Dietrich cycle. These heroic cycles of lore bear witness to the continued sense of importance the secular princely courts of Germania gave to their own ancient native traditions.

Continental Law and Politics

The Saxon period (919–1024) of the Holy Roman Empire was the time when the Empire became a more explicitly Germanic institution. This constituted a revitalization of an Empire in decline since the time of Charlemagne. The Saxon period was followed by the Salic-Frankish dynasty (1024–1125), and then by the Hohenstaufen dynasty (1125–1268). In the early part of this time, from its beginnings to the Investiture Controversy (1075–1122), the German world of law and politics was still generally operating under age-old traditional concepts of royal authority derived from the consent of the freemen and aristocracy, as we saw expressed in the Visigothic laws. So it is only with the zenith of Christian authority in the High Middle Ages that this aspect of Germanic culture significantly waned in favor of royal authoritarianism.

This period also coincides with the beginning of the Crusades (1096–1099) in which emotional religious fervor was combined with military exploits. This combination is rather incomprehensible from the perspective of the pacifistic philosophy of primitive Christianity, but it makes sense in terms of the peculiar *coincidentia oppositorum*, or unity of opposites, exemplified by the Germanic Middle Ages. The struggles of material, earthly reality were seen as being motivated by a desire to bring that reality into harmony with a heavenly model. This is theoretically and structurally consistent with the attitudes of the heathen Germanic peoples—only the names of the gods have been changed.

As Europe adopted a more capitalistic, free-market economy in the waning of the Middle Ages, the privileges and advantages of knighthood declined as well. The people who benefited from the changes taking place at the close of the Middle Ages (fourteenth–fifteenth centuries) were the freemen of non-noble ancestry. But lawlessness grew with the decline of imperial power, and among the chief lawbreakers were the nobles and knights themselves. They applied increasingly draconian laws—the rule of the fist—to the freemen and churchmen alike.

In this time when ancient principles were being violated by the very people who were supposed to be upholding them, there arose a mysterious institution: the Holy Vehme (*Feme/Veme* and *Vehme* are alternate spellings).³² The Vehme itself was of ancient origin. Its formal institutions go back to the time of Charlemagne, who had established the idea of free-courts in which freemen could apply ancient customary laws to ensure peace and good order in society. The Vehme was primarily found in the Westphalian region of northwestern Germany. Nobles interested in reestablishing law and order joined with the peasant freemen to form what amounted to a secret society for the covert application of ancient law. The identities of the members were kept secret, as were many of the details of their operations. They held secret tribunals in which those who violated the laws would be sentenced to death (by hanging). The accused who could not be brought before the court in person were often condemned *in absentia* and declared *vogelfrei* ("free as a bird," i.e., outside the protection of the law). In these instances any and all members of the Vehme were duty-bound to carry out the death sentence against the guilty party. The Vehme became powerful, but by the end of the fifteenth century it began to abuse its authority and was eventually suppressed. It is widely rumored to have continued underground³³ and was romanticized by writers such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (in *Götz von Berlichingen*, 1773) and Heinrich von Kleist (in *Das Käthchen von Heilbronn*, 1810).

Continental Literature of the Ninth Century

The literature of the early Middle Ages provides only scant remnants of the pre-Christian heroic culture. The only early fragment of the heroic poetry to survive is the *Hildebrandslied*, discussed later in this chapter. In a more theological and eschatological vein, there is a tenth-century Bavarian transcription of a poem originally composed around 830 called the *Muspilli*.³⁴ This only survives as a fragment; the beginning and the end are lost because they were written inside the covers of a book and these panels were eventually discarded. The word *muspilli* answers to the Old Norse *Muspell* (as in Muspellsheimr, the cosmic realm of fire in Norse mythology). The poem itself is largely Christian in content, but deviates from biblical lore on occasion in favor of what appear to be folk motifs (e.g., the blood of Elijah falling to the ground and catching fire, which causes a worldwide conflagration). It would appear that this Christian poem was written by someone with deep knowledge of Germanic lore, who wanted to

convince his heathen readers that the end of the world was imminent and that their sacred clanic relationships could not save them from this disaster. This is a clear example of Christian evangelism directed at undermining the solidarity of the Germanic tribal, clanic, and familial life, which was the chief obstacle standing in the way of Christian spiritual domination.

It is in medieval literature that the persistence of Germanic culture can be discerned. Important written works have survived which demonstrate the degree to which the Christian mythology was modified to accommodate Germanic cultural values, and the ways in which more archaic and half-forgotten values were revalorized. Medieval literature provides ample evidence of the ideas valued by the secular elite of Germany. What emerges from a survey of this literature is the level to which autochthonous ideas persisted and were preserved in oral transmission throughout the medieval centuries.

Long before the renaissance of the heroic-aristocratic values in the thirteenth century, Old Saxon literature provides us with the most remarkable single document that exemplifies the Germanization of Christian mythology: the *Heliand*.³⁵ *Heliand* means “savior” in Old Saxon. The epic verse was composed around 830 by an anonymous “poet-monk (perhaps an ex-warrior).”³⁶ It is a retelling of the story of the life of Jesus in Germanic alliterative verse. This is *not* a translation of the gospels, but an original composition that allows the poet to recast the Christian myth in almost entirely Germanic terms. Jesus becomes a warrior-lord (OS *drohtin*) with a retinue of twelve warriors who fight against Rome. On one level it can be interpreted as a reference to the Saxon’s own recent defeat at the hands of the “new Rome” of Charlemagne. The poet was certainly a Saxon with tribal affinities to his own people. He was also an educated Christian, but one who retained great knowledge of, and sympathy for, Germanic cultural values. In the nineteenth century, A. F. C. Vilmar produced an extensive study of ancient Germanic features contained in the *Heliand*.³⁷ These spanned over eight categories: epic form; mythology; view of nature; attitude of mind; morals, household, possessions, and financial worth; (family) relations; people and king; and the life of the warrior. In each of these areas Vilmar found substantial Germanic material. G. Ronald Murphy, while faulting Vilmar on his nationalistic subtext, largely supports the idea that the *Heliand* is a product of the Germanic spirit: “The *Heliand* author possesses a deeply respectful attitude toward the values of Germanic religion and culture, but an equally careful regard for his Christianity. Thus his ‘German-ization’ is not crude, paganizing theology, but a moving blend of spiritual sensibility and Germanic poetry.”³⁸ The *Heliand* poet acknowledges the power of *wurd* (“fate”) and *metod* (“time/ measurement”)—to which even the Germanic gods themselves were subject—but is at pains to try to claim that Christ is not subject to these forces.³⁹ Interestingly, the poet also attempts to relocate the biblical narrative to a North Sea and Saxon location with a subtle use of language.⁴⁰

The *Heliand* is especially rich in subtle clues as to how the verbal magical ideology of the heathen Saxons was continued in a Christian context. The verbal formulas of Jesus—who is subtly identified with Woden—are depicted as secret (runic) utterances that give the speaker power. Jesus’ disciples request that he “*gerihtu us that geruni!*” that is, “teach us the secret runes!”⁴¹ This magical interpretation is even applied to the Lord’s Prayer. As Murphy notes, “The Lord’s Prayer thus becomes most specifically the replacement for Woden’s runic charms that were relied on in the north to give access to the divine. Jesus is depicted, as Woden, knowing secret sayings that grant divine contact and placing power into the hands of selected followers who know the secret formulas.”⁴² The importance of the *Heliand* to the continued Christianization of Germania has often gone unrecognized. It is, however, a key document in our quest to understand how the Christianization of the north took place only as a parallel development with the Germanization of Christianity.

The Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Renaissance

Throughout Germania at the end of the 1100s and the beginning of the 1200s there was a rebirth of archaic heroic mythology with roots stretching back into the Migration Age. Tales of heroes proliferated in Germany. These tales formed parts of two different, yet often linked, cycles of tales: the Nibelungen-cycle, centered on the hero Siegfried/Sigurðr, and the Dietrich-cycle, centered on the legendary personalities connected to the court of Dietrich/Piðrekr of Bern. Dietrich is identified with Theodoric the Great, king of the Ostrogoths in Italy (493–526). These mythic-heroic cycles emerged from the oral tradition that had been kept alive in some corners of secular society since the arrival of Christianity, although they had not been written down for close to four hundred years. But around 1200, on the eastern fringe of the Empire, ancient tales began to be told again.

The Nibelungen Cycle

The *Nibelungenlied* (Song of the Nibelungs)⁴³ was composed in Middle High German by an anonymous poet sometime around 1200. His homeland was somewhere along the Danube river between Passau and Vienna. The poet's personality can be inferred from the text to some extent. He was a conservative member of the aristocratic knighthood and a proponent of the more archaic ideals and values of the heroic-aristocratic world as compared to the newly emerged feudal-chivalric social order. An archaic mythology wrapped in the Germanic past is invoked to preserve and promote the heroic values of that tradition.

The mythic world of the *Nibelungenlied* has become superficially Christianized, and the native Germanic gods no longer seem to play a role.⁴⁴ However, here, as elsewhere in Middle High German heroic epic, the church and its doctrines have little importance either. The meta-narrative that supports these works springs almost entirely from the secular aristocratic world. The roots of that world are in the heathen age, although many details about that age have already been lost. But quite a few things survived as well. Not only did the 2,382 lines of the *Nibelungenlied* revive ancient Germanic tales of heroes, they did so in the peculiarly Germanic form of strophic verse arranged in half-lines. Archaic details about the life of the mythic hero Sifrit remain, like Sifrit's slaying of the dragon and then bathing in its blood to gain invincibility (st. 100), and his own death when he is stabbed by a spear in the one remaining point of vulnerability on his body (st. 980–981).

The *Nibelungenlied* was not an isolated work. But it is the greatest single example of the medieval rebirth of Germanic heroic poetry. There are other poems, or songs, in this cycle. *Diu Klage* (The Lament), written about 1220 in southern Germany, is a mythic attempt to re-establish the ideal society destroyed in the *Nibelungenlied*. From the same southern German milieu comes *Kudrun* (written between 1230 and 1240), which is similar to the *Nibelungenlied* in its harkening back to a heroic age, but unlike the *Nibelungenlied* in spirit. The *Kudrun* is set in the Viking Age and has a "happy ending." The *Rosengarten zu Worms* (Rose Garden at Worms), from the mid-thirteenth century, is a popular, action-filled story about Kriemhild. Finally, there is *Das Lied vom hürnen Seyfrid* (The Song of Horn-skinned Seyfrid [= Siegfried]), which is medieval, but exclusively transmitted in printed books of the sixteenth century. This work was also very popular and existed in many versions.

Evidence shows that during the thirteenth century there was a renaissance of interest in the heroic mythology of the Germanic past. Books containing this material did not exist. It had to be drawn from what had survived in the courtly oral tradition. The revived interest also meant that songs composed in this period were recorded in written form and thus preserved until a time when later humanists and Romantics would collect, edit, publish, and translate them. The *Nibelungen* material, already a trans-tribal Germanic mythology transmitted in oral form, was reformed and recorded in several versions in the thirteenth century. These versions would become a major source for future revivalist movements in the centuries to come.⁴⁵

The Dietrich Cycle

Closely related to the *Nibelungen* cycle is the so-called Dietrich cycle. While the *Nibelungen* material was attached to historical events surrounding the Burgundians in the fifth century, the Dietrich material is connected to the court of Theodoric the Great. The tales themselves rarely have historical value. They belong to the realm of traditional heroic mythology and probably contain paradigms and archetypes with roots in the archaic past.

The earliest surviving Germanic example of material from the Dietrich cycle is the fragmentary Old Saxon/Old High German *Hildebrandslied* (ca. 840). It was discovered on the inside cover of a Latin theological text in the Monastery of Fulda. The poem tells of the single-combat between Hildebrand and his son Hadubrand, which inaugurates a tragic moral conflict between familial love and loyalty to one's lord. The original of this lay was probably composed in Italy (Lombardy) and became progressively mixed with more northerly dialects as it migrated northward—until it was written down in Fulda. The page was looted by American soldiers at the end of World War II, but has since been returned to Kassel.

The major work of the Dietrich cycle is now only preserved in a Norse translation made at the court of King Hákon the Old of Norway (1216–1263). This is called the *Piðreks saga af Bern*⁴⁶ and is made up of many sections, each called a "saga," about various members of Dietrich's court and other Germanic heroes, including Siegfried. The lost original was presumably composed in Low German and compiled in some form in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century in northern Germany. There are a little over a dozen surviving medieval poems related to the Dietrich cycle, as well as the printed prose work, the *Heldenbuch* (Book of Heroes), which was first published in 1483.

The Dietrich cycle provides extensive information on the courts of Theodoric and Attila ("the Hun"). What is remarkable is that both Theodoric and Attila are viewed in a largely positive light in this heroic material, despite being roundly vilified in documents produced in a clerical context shortly after their deaths and throughout the Middle Ages. This negative view was not a part of contemporary courtly legend; these two men were vilified

because of their anti-church, or even anti-Christian stances. The fact that they are portrayed sympathetically in medieval German heroic mythology should perhaps be seen as a signal that the royal secular culture was aware of its underlying heathen roots. This may explain the centuries-long mythic idealization of the court of Attila. It acted as a “safe,” exotic metaphor for a sense of separateness of the royal court life from church-dominated culture. Both the idealized courts of Theodoric (Dietrich) and Attila (Etzel) could be compared to that of Arthur in the British sources. It should be remembered that the name “Attila” is actually a Gothic (Germanic) word meaning “Little Father.”⁴⁷

The Hunnic invasions of Europe (beginning around 375) spelled disaster for many Germanic tribes. This is partially reflected in the heroic literature for centuries to come. Yet the Huns also provided many opportunities to Germanic leaders and tribes interested in a non-Roman, non-Christian cultural alternative. In reviving and perpetuating tales of legendary heroes connected to these courts, the poets of courtly medieval Germany were keeping what remained of the ancient tradition alive.

The Nibelungen and Dietrich cycles are expressions of a secularized medieval court culture that seems to have longed for a time when the sacred and secular were more unified in the context of their own homegrown traditions. These works are acts of subtle protest against the Christian worldview, which was increasingly hostile to the heroic-aristocratic values of the earlier period.

These poems were first and foremost *performed* art. They were not intended to be read silently and alone, but rather they were meant to be performed (or read aloud) before an audience at court. Therefore it can be seen that these works were intended to have a broad effect in the society in which they were recited. This effect was largely supportive of the heroic-aristocratic world-order and the subtle separation of the courtly culture from the ecclesiastical-clerical world. The church and its ministers play little role in this heroic realm. So although the ancient Germanic gods and goddesses are nowhere to be seen, the pre-Christian heroic warrior code is kept alive in the names of the heroes inherited from earlier times.

Medieval Texts about Germanic Antiquity

Although important and influential in their own time, the histories and chronicles of the ancient and medieval periods that tell of Germanic antiquity are now virtually forgotten. The *Germania* of Tacitus (ca. 98 CE) is well known even today, yet dozens of other accounts have been forgotten. But in the Middle Ages they were all widely read by the learned and so they both preserved and created many ideas about the Germanic peoples. A study of these sources has been offered by Frank Borhardt, which has proven to be indispensable to the present work.⁴⁸ There were over two dozen major authors who wrote on the topic of Germanic antiquities before ca. 1400, and they have some interesting myths to recount.

The writers, mostly clerics, had definite agendas for their works. The histories they penned tended not to be objective and factual, but traditional (i.e., reflective of received lore, oral or written) and often polemic. [Chapter four](#) of Borhardt’s 1971 book outlines the principal authors of the medieval period. The most noteworthy of these are Jordanes (*Getica*, 551), Paulus Diaconus (*History of the Langobards*, ca. 787–796), “Fredegarius” (a group of compilers who wrote under this name between 660 and 739), and Adam of Bremen (late eleventh century).

What is important to us here is the catalog of myths that emerge from this literature—myths reflecting pre-Christian patterns of thought which persisted throughout the Middle Ages. A major recurring motif is that of the *conquering invader*. Germanic nations often traced their origins back to this tradition. “A nation in Scandinavia suffers from a great famine. A certain portion of that nation is obliged to leave that the rest may survive. The portion is selected and leaves under distinguished leadership. When it reaches the continent, it confronts a nation with which it makes war and which it defeats.”⁴⁹ This myth, rooted in historical fact, can be traced back to the Indo-European migrations thousands of years earlier and is reflected in the traditions of the Goths, the Langobards, and the English.

Furthermore, there is a whole typology of mythic origins that trace the source of the “invasions” back either to the *north*, or to the *east*.⁵⁰ The Goths, the Langobards, the Swabians, and the Saxons were said to originate in the north. Myths of northern origins tended to be developed from “popular” oral histories and traditions, while ones relating to the east tended to be derived from “learned” written sources. This latter group used biblical, Vergilian/Homeric, or Alexandrian source material. Clerics used the biblical myth of Noah and his three sons to provide a genealogy for all the peoples of the world, while those of a more classical bent preferred the idea that different tribes originated in Troy (e.g., the Franks) or Macedonia (e.g., the Saxons). In all cases the myth of the conquering invader is preserved. The northern point of origin merely seems to be the more archaic and autochthonous, while the shift to the east appears to mirror the tendency to valorize foreign ideas from the east (Christianity and Classicism).

The Middle Ages also generated a number of myths of its own. Perhaps the most important of these surround two (or three) great kings—Theodoric the Great and Friedrich (Barbarossa). It was Pope Gregory I (540–604) who invented the fable that the soul of Theodoric the Great was seen descending into a volcano in Sicily at the hour of his death. These myths surrounding Emperor Friedrich are of extreme importance. The myths conflate two different Emperors, Friedrich I (Barbarossa) [1152–1190] and Friedrich II (the Antichrist) [1211–1250]. Barbarossa died while on crusade and his place of burial is unknown, while uncertainty also surrounds the death of Friedrich II, who was excommunicated by the Pope and was even thought to be a “black magician.” An emperor named Friedrich was supposed to be the Last Emperor (*Endkaiser*). In a chapbook of 1519 the myth is summarized: At the end, Friedrich was not lost, and no one knows where he came to or where he lies buried. The peasants (heretics) and black magicians say he is still alive in a hollow mountain, and that he is supposed to return again, punish the clergy, and hang a shield on a bare tree, which the sultans keep carefully guarded.⁵¹ The “hollow mountain” is most often identified as the Kyffhäuser in Thuringia. In later versions the mountain is circled by ravens who will inform the sleeping Emperor when it is time to awaken and lead his people in their hour of greatest need. Emperor Friedrich could be seen as a hero or villain, depending on the intentions of the storyteller.

These myths surrounding Emperor Friedrich relate directly to a larger medieval myth that this kind of literature was instrumental in supporting: the myth of the *translatio* of the power of the Roman Empire from its seat in Rome to a new seat in Germany. This literature promoted the idea that the great German emperors Charlemagne (Karl), Otto, and Friedrich were *just as Roman* as Caesar or Augustus. The *translatio* was effected in two ways—by conquest (the Goth Alaric conquered the city of Rome in 410 CE), and by investiture (Charlemagne was crowned the new Roman Emperor in 800 CE). This myth of the Germano-Roman Empire, or *Reich*, would have continuing effects on the nature of the reawakening of the German “past” in subsequent periods of history, and is a decisive factor separating German and Scandinavian national mythology, for example.

Germanized Religion

While tales of heroes were being retold in the royal courts, traditional Germanic values continued to make a subtle impact on religious doctrines even at the zenith of the Middle Ages. Two of the main areas in which this influence was felt were the development of the crusading ideology and the perhaps related evolution of German mystical ideas. The heroic Germanic ideal of imposing the will of the gods, and their more perfect world, on the structure of the terrestrial world by using physical and mental power may indeed be reflected in the increased importance of the warrior code and of mystical thought during the Christian Middle Ages.

The early Middle Ages retained many pagan usages—especially in the area of “magic,” or *practical theology*. The most famous example of this is the Old High German *Second Merseburger Charm*, which dates from the early tenth century.⁵² It contains the names of old Germanic divinities such as Wodan, Balder, and Frija. The operative formula “*ben zi bena, bluot zi blouda*” (“bone to bone, blood to blood”) has analogs in the *Atharva Veda* (IV, 12) from India, which dates from around 500 BCE. Variant Christianized forms of the charm were recorded as late as the middle of the nineteenth century.⁵³ Of course, these remnants represent only the smallest fraction of what must have been available for use in the everyday lives of the people.

The Germanization of the liturgical forms and formulas undertaken in the Carolingian world had a general effect throughout Christendom when the Saxon Ottonian emperors moved their capital from Saxony to Rome in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

Crusade

During the so-called High Middle Ages, the church was perhaps at the height of its political power in Europe. Christian power was being consolidated in Europe, and with this there came an impetus to move outward in military campaigns in the name of Christ. This militant spirit found expression in the *Crusades*. From 1096 to 1291 various armies from the Christian West attempted—and for a time succeeded—in their efforts to conquer the “Holy Land” in the Levant. This region had been under the control of the Muslims since the 630s. Eventually the forces of Christendom were thwarted, but not before they had had many successes.

Historically, the whole idea of a “war for Christ” seems problematic. What is the origin of the Crusader ideology? At least one prominent theory holds that the Crusades represented an outgrowth of Germanic values then embedded in Christianity. Carl Erdmann writes: “The church was therefore confronted with a massive barrier of pagan ways, which for centuries were beyond its power to master.”⁵⁴

Nevertheless, the German mentality also exercised a positive influence upon the development of the ecclesiastical morality of war. When the church encountered pagan elements that it could not suppress, it tended to

give them a Christian dimension, thereby assimilating them. This happened to the ethics of heroism. The whole crusading movement may justifiably be seen from this perspective; Christian knighthood cannot otherwise be understood. This evolution began in earnest only around 1000, but prefigurations of it do, of course, appear earlier. To some extent, the development of the Christian cult of the archangel Michael reflects this process.⁵⁵

Whether consciously or unconsciously, it would seem that the idea of traveling *to the east* to fight the enemies of the divine order would have struck a responsive chord in the hearts of the Germanic warriors, whose ancestors had probably known stories of the thunder-god, Þórr-Donar, who did the same thing.

Mysticism

The German mystics were not content with idle speculation and intellectual contemplation—they demanded direct experience in, and interaction with, the physical world. This enactment could come in the form of aid to the sick and poor, in the case of theological mystics like Meister Eckhart. However, in the case of the militant mystics, such as the Teutonic Knights, it came in the form of war on the ungodly frontiers surrounding the realm of divine order.

Militant Mystics: The Teutonic Knights

Founded during the Third Crusade in 1190, the *Deutscher Ritterorden*⁵⁶ is best known for its role in the expansion of German territory eastward along the Baltic Sea between 1226 and 1410. The order was created during the siege of Acre, and was made up of noble brethren, priests, and lay brethren from Germany. Back in their homeland they turned their crusading energies away from the far-off Muslim infidels to the nearby Slavic, Balto-Slavic, and Estonian heathens to the east of Germany. At one point their influence extended all the way to Estonia and Gotland.

The Teutonic Knights combined martial prowess and administrative efficiency with mystical fervor and ascetic spirit. They had mastered both the worldly arts of warfare and the spiritual arts of mysticism. Their *Rule* of 1264 reveals a disciplined mindset dedicated to the defense of the honor of God. In the third section of the *Rule* we read:

This order, which signifies both the heavenly and the earthly knighthood, is the foremost because it has promised to avenge the dishonoring of God and His Cross and to fight so that the Holy Land, which infidels subjected to their rule, shall belong to the Christians. St. John also saw a new knighthood descending from heaven. This vision signifies to us that the church now shall have knights sworn to drive out the enemies of the church by force.

Nowhere in the history of the Middle Ages is the idea of “war in the name of God” more perfectly expressed than in the history of the Teutonic Knights. The specifically Germanic traits perpetuated and to some extent revived by this order lie in its holistic view of human action, which rejected the duality between sacred and profane deeds. Actions undertaken in the world can have an effect on the heavenly realm, and by the same token, conflicts in this world can be a reflection of cosmic battles.

An anonymous document, the *Theologia Germanica*, was written by one of the Teutonic Knights in 1350, but not printed until Martin Luther released his “95 Theses” in 1517. Nevertheless it was known to many mystics of the Middle Ages. Glenn Magee summarizes one important aspect of this tract by writing that it “teaches that God requires man to redeem the world, but to achieve this man must first come to know God. God is a perfect whole, and knowing the whole requires emptying the mind of images.”⁵⁷ The Teutonic Knight not only carried out a “crusade” in the material world, but within his own mind as well.

The fact that the battles of the Teutonic Knights seemed to have an ethnic component, pitting the Germans against the Slavs, also fueled the imaginations of later *völkisch* commentators.⁵⁸

Theological Mystics

The earliest phase of German mysticism is characterized as *Frauenmystik*, that is, the often “unlearned” mysticism practiced by the many women who entered the convents in the wake of the decimation of the male population due to losses in the eastern Crusades.⁵⁹ The most famous among these female mystics are Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179) and Mechthild von Magdeburg (1207/10–1282). It is telling that in the land where pagan seeresses had once been given such spiritual authority, centuries later women would be the ones to revive the mystical impulse at an early stage in the history of German Christendom.

Perhaps the most important exponents of Medieval German mysticism were Meister Eckhart (1260–1327) and those who followed him, Johannes Tauler (1300–1361), Heinrich Suso (1295–1366), and Nicholas von Cusa (1401–

1464). Eckhart was also the student of Albertus Magnus (1200–1280). As a teacher himself, it is curious to note that Eckhart was actually charged with instructing nuns, and that since they were not generally as learned in Latin as men, Eckhart often preached to them in German. He thus began to adapt philosophical and mystical expressions into his native language. Eckhart had widely studied other mystics such as the fifth-century Pseudo-Dionysius. But what makes Eckhart's writings unique is that their sources must be sought elsewhere—either in original thought or local wisdom.

The Rhineland region in which Eckhart spent so many of his productive years was heavily populated by members of the movement known as the Brethren of the Free Spirit, who held many pantheistic beliefs.⁶⁰ It is for the heresy of pantheism that Eckhart was posthumously condemned by the Pope in 1329. In essence, Eckhart's philosophy was problematical for the Catholic dogmas of *original sin* (the idea that all humans are born in a Fallen State, devoid of God's goodness) and *grace* (the belief that the only way for Fallen men to be saved is by God's gift, or *grace*). Based on mystical inner experience, combined with readings in earlier thought, Eckhart developed a number of ideas that challenged these dogmas. Among them is the idea that each human possesses a *Fünklein* (Ger. "little spark") of the divine, which is both the innermost part of the human being and the apex of human consciousness. It was here that Eckhart experienced the mystical union taking place and the divine *logos* being born. This was an uncreated, creative part of humanity.

Before he was forced to recant his more original ideas by the church, Eckhart posited a profound link between God, the world, and the human soul. As Magee writes, "Eckhart comes quite close in many places to affirming that man is God."⁶¹ Eckhart felt that man is *necessary* to divine completion or actualization, and that the human soul is the equivalent of God on a smaller scale.⁶²

In a related idea, Eckhart further conceived of a virtual *blood relationship* between man and God.⁶³ The concept of a genetic link to God was antithetical to the contractually bound, faith-based Judeo-Christian conception of man's relationship to God, and harkens back to pre-Christian Germanic models of how humanity relates to the divine. The very notion that man could access the divine through a process of turning inward is in fundamental opposition to Christian doctrine and will be a major theme of the Germanic reawakening for centuries to come.

The ideas of Nicholas von Cusa echoed those of Eckhart to a great extent, but he made his own unique contributions, which went largely unnoticed until the nineteenth century. Magee summarizes some of Cusa's more important ideas as follows:

Cusa . . . taught that the mind of man is structurally isomorphic with the mind of God. The major difference between human *mens* and the divine is that while God creates things with His mind, we create only images or ideas of things. God creates an actual world, whereas man creates a mental world, a world of ideas. We can, however, through physical labor, bring our ideas to fruition in reality with exactitude, though our use of mathematics. There is, then, an analogy between man and God, and Cusa is not shy about exploiting it and treating man as a "little God."⁶⁴

Although mystical ideas in Germany owe their direct origins to the writings of the Neoplatonists and other sources from the south, the shape and direction, as well as the deep and lasting roots struck by these ideas, likely owe a great deal to the underlying intellectual structures inherited from pre-Christian Germania.

It is widely and in some ways rightly assumed that the Middle Ages represented a low ebb for the autochthonous cultural patterns of the various European nations. This assumption can be misleading when it mistakes the conscious beliefs of peoples *about* their behaviors with the unconscious origins of their actions. The pre-Christian ethos of Germany was very much alive and vital in many aspects of medieval culture, even if the names of the old gods had faded from active religious use. The old heroes—such as Siegfried—did remain active, however. It is in the pre-Christian heroic pattern of sanctification through idealized action in the world that fills the soul of both the warring crusader and the contemplative mystic alike. These heroic codes and mystical impulses were so entrenched that their indelible marks can still be discerned in the language used in Germany today.

Continental Germanic Language

The language of modern Germany has its roots in the earlier stages of the dialect known as Old High German (the language spoken before about 1100) and Middle High German (which was spoken between 1100 and 1450). The dialects of the Middle Ages are important for our topic due mainly to the fact that they were the language of medieval heroic poetry and were encoded with certain mystical ideas by thinkers like Meister Eckhart. Language itself is (a sometimes unconscious) carrier of cultural ideas across the centuries.

The courts of the secular lords continued to use the vernacular tribal dialect for everyday discourse and for the entertainment of the warriors or knights. Latin was used for legal matters, but as noted with the discussion of the Franks, this medieval legalistic Latin had to be admixed with Latinized Germanic words to account for the many Germanic legal concepts embodied in the law. The use of the national dialects in formal literature and performed speech is of great importance. Formal communication under the influence of the Roman church had to be done in Latin. The *scriptoria* controlled by the church acted as clearing houses for written communication, both ecclesiastical and secular. Although a considerable amount of written material was likely produced and transmitted in the vernacular languages, little of it has survived because the church largely controlled the reproduction and dissemination of the manuscripts.

Middle High German courtly poetry of the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries preserved and revalorized the heroic code. Poetry was produced in epic as well as lyric forms. The latter, although not derived from the earlier Germanic tradition, did represent a cultural influence that was secular and ran against the current promoted by the church.⁶⁵ Epic poetry in the Germanic style and theme of the *Nibelungenlied* most exemplified this vernacular use of language, although the Middle High German epics produced in the Arthurian genre also celebrate many Indo-European heroic virtues as well. The *Parzival* of Wolfram von Eschenbach is the most outstanding example of this.⁶⁶ In the process of creating this literature, a certain vocabulary was either preserved or regenerated to reflect the contemporary virtues and concerns of the warrior-knight. Words such as *wîc* ("battle"), *urliuge* ("war"), *wal* ("battlefield"), and *trehtîn* ("God, Lord") all reflect ancient Germanic concepts. These are most frequent in certain heroic epics and in the lyric poetry, whereas they are found less in chivalric courtly works, being increasingly replaced by words of French origin.

Mystical writings in Middle High German express through native German words inner spiritual experience in a direct fashion. It would appear to be no accident that these inner experiences of Germanic individuals would require German words to express them most perfectly. Latin was simply too indirect. The single most important creator of this mystical vocabulary was Meister Eckhart. The fact that the Dominican preacher and professor should use German at all for philosophical and theological discourse is a bold statement of cultural self-assertion. Eckhart was, as we have seen, condemned posthumously for "pantheistic" tendencies. It has been noted that "Eckhart was sufficiently orthodox in Latin but when he found himself preaching and writing in German, the formal restraints of the official church language seemed to drop off."⁶⁷ Eckhart's use of his own language for explorations of an inner spiritual landscape was not only an exercise in direct experiential mysticism, but also helped form the modern German language. He used prefixes (such as *be-*, *ent-*, *er-*, *ver-*, and *zer-*) and suffixes (such as *-heit*, *-nis*, *-unge*, and *-schaft*) to express abstract meanings through concrete words. This was the beginning of the creation of a philosophical German language. Similar advances had been made in Old English—but these advances were lost after the Norman Invasion in 1066.

At this point a note should be added about the history of the weekday names in the Germanic languages.⁶⁸ It is likely that the names of the seven days of the week were originally examples of loan-translations from Latin, although early Greek influence is also found. Of special interest are the names *dies Martis* (day of Mars), *dies Mercurii* (day of Mercury), *dies Jovis* (day of Jupiter), and *dies Veneris* (day of Venus). Certainly the translation of these names into Germanic first took place in a time well before Christianity was fully established. In Old High German, which had many dialectal variations, we find *Ziuwes tac* (Tuesday), *Wuotanes tac* (Wednesday), *Donares tac* (Thursday), and *Frije tac* (Friday). Tuesday is also called *Dînstac* (< *dings-tac*, "thing's-day," i.e., the day of the legal assembly), and in Bavaria *Erctac* (from day of Ares [= Greek god of war]). In some dialects *Wuotanes tac* was forbidden, as the speaking of the name of this high-god was especially taboo. Hence the euphemism *Mittwoch* ("Mid-week") appears in those dialects. In Old English the situation is more straightforward. There we find *Tīwes dæg*, *Wōdenes dæg*, *Punores dæg*, and *Frige dæg*, from whence is derived our current modern English names of the weekdays. "Thursday" is a form influenced by Norse *Þórsdagr*. In Old Norse we find *Týsdagr* (Tuesday), *Óðinsdagr* (Wednesday), *Þórsdagr* (Thursday), and *Fríggjardagr* or *Freyjudagr* (Friday). Modern Icelandic has rejected these terms in favor of euphemisms. The antiquity of these names is not as important as the loyalty they commanded once they had been adopted. There is ample evidence that the church fought against the use of these names among the people—as reciting the names of the heathen gods in any context would be tantamount to an invocation. Despite this, the names have largely survived to this day in English, Scandinavian, as well as in German. Ironically, the average speaker of these languages today no longer recognizes the significance of these names. But the names are still there, awaiting the day of reawakening.

Words and names are important, even if their significance becomes temporarily lost. Ideas are embedded in words, and as long as the words survive the ideas are subject to rediscovery. The language of the court and

mysticism, in addition to the common use of words such as the weekday names, provide examples of how ideas survived, albeit ensconced in the language.

Continental Germanic Material Culture

The continental West Germanic culture left behind very little in the way of material culture that reflects pre-Christian ideas. There are the expected small artifacts, usually found as grave goods in inhumation burials. Of these, many thousands have been discovered in the tribal areas of the Saxons, Thuringians, Alemanns, Bavarians, and Franks east of the Rhine. The record of the material culture shows that for centuries after the nominal conversion of these peoples they continued to use native Germanic principles of design in the production of all sorts of objects meant to project an aura of prestige for the wearer or owner.

The use of Germanic aesthetics waned steadily as the cosmopolitan culture promoted by the Christian church waxed. By around 1000 CE the old styles had almost entirely disappeared from the European continent—although they were still fully in vogue in Scandinavia. As Christianity spread after the turn of the first millennium there arose a new syncretic culture that combined Christianity (by then largely Germanized) with many still vital Scandinavian cultural patterns. Although perhaps not all “Gothic” architecture can be traced back to a Scandinavian influence on the European continent, many of the so-called Gothic features do have these origins.⁶⁹ This is explained by the fact that the Scandinavians adapted many of the Germanic woodcarving and construction techniques to stone, but had to go to the continent to implement these skills due to the widespread lack of financial resources in their native countries.⁷⁰

In any event, it is universally agreed that the new style of architecture first made its appearance in northern Europe and that it is inexorably linked to the “spirit” of the north. The first signs of a fully developed Gothic architecture occur in northern France around 1150. This new style was generally applied to the great cathedrals being built in that era in the then-booming cities and towns. Such a building was used not only for church services, but also as a “theater, classroom, concert hall, court and general meeting place.”⁷¹ Reinhardt summarizes:

[Gothic architecture] embodies the culture and splendor of knighthood, the enthusiasm of the Crusader, the individualism of the burgher. It is, in short, the most striking expression of the changing and changed spirit of the age, the symbol of a new rhythm and meaning of life. It expresses the longing of the heart whose attachment is divided between heaven and earth.⁷²

The general theme of Germanic thought, as expressed on the continent of Europe through the Middle Ages, was the idea of a synthesis between heaven and earth. This represented a groping attempt, in the face of orthodox doctrinal opposition, to repair the rift between the realm of the gods and the realm of men and to restore the link uniting them. Essentially, Gothic architecture is one more effort in this direction. This also accounts for the later Romantic identification with this style.

No other part of Germania came under so much influence from the mythology of Rome and its Empire than Germany. A great deal of the pre-Christian lore was lost in Germany due to relatively early Christianization as well as the enthusiastic Germanization of Christian mythology. This created a situation in which the pre-Christian mythology appeared to vanish, but in fact it was to a great extent recast in what *appeared* to be Christian practices. The main area in which pre- and non-Christian myth and cultural values openly survived was in the heroic literature—especially in that of the thirteenth-century “renaissance.” Despite its historical problems, Germany would continue to represent one of the two major breeding grounds for self-aware movements toward reawakening Germanic culture in the centuries to come. One of the main reasons for this is that the Germans were continually reminded of their heathen origins in the literature originating in the ancient and medieval periods.

England

None of the Germanic nations has a more complex cultural history than England. Most of these complexities stem from historical events of the Middle Ages. The Anglo-Saxons, who had colonized the southern part of Britain beginning around 450 CE, quickly achieved total cultural hegemony. The degree to which English culture subsumed that of the Brittonic (Celtic) inhabitants can be measured by the fact that virtually no Celtic words are found in the Old English language. After about 800 CE, the English were partially displaced by the invading (and equally Germanic) Norsemen from Denmark and Norway. Norse linguistic influence on English was enormous. In many areas of England, a synthesis of Anglo-Saxon and Norse cultures was achieved. For most of the time between 800

and 1066, the Norsemen in England were pagan, whereas the English had been nominally Christianized since the end of the seventh century. But in 1066, English cultural history was struck by Norman lightning.

Medieval English history is divided into two halves: one before 1066, and one between that fateful year and 1500. In the Anglo-Saxon period (450–1066), England follows patterns of development similar to those found in the histories of other Germanic lands. But in the high- and late-medieval periods after the Norman Conquest, a number of complicating factors (such as the dominance of the French language at court and the virtual blackout of information on the preservation of Anglo-Saxon tradition) obscure the usual course of cultural history.

Despite this significant disruption, the English tradition is rich in features of Germanic survivals in the Middle Ages. These are especially apparent in the areas of law, political theory, and folklore. It will be seen that before the Norman-French influence, the Anglo-Saxon language was already showing signs of developing into a philosophical language centuries before German evolved in a similar direction. This heritage was largely lost in the aftermath of 1066.

English Law and Politics

Nowhere else did Germanic concepts of law survive more intact than they did in England. The continental Germanic nations were eventually Romanized by the time of Napoleon. But English Common Law persevered through many challenges in the Middle Ages and beyond. In the Anglo-Saxon period, laws and political theory and practice were based directly on Germanic predecessors. But in the Norman period, and for the rest of the Middle Ages, certain English ideas regarding law and politics would struggle against some newly established continental mores. However, these concepts would eventually re-establish themselves.

Anglo-Saxon culture was rooted in archaic Germanic beliefs about the law. The chief legal concept is that the law is both customary and subject to modification based on evolving circumstances. New situations could be judged in light of previous applications of the law. Hence the legal record was crucial. With the coming of Christianity and the use of writing for legal codes these ideas were committed to written form. Anglo-Saxon law codes are the closest in spirit to the pre-Christian law of any of the old Germanic law codes, but they are not simply the heathen law written down.

Underlying the encoded laws of kings is the idea of a higher law—that of the cosmos and of the gods. The laws of kings simply attempt, with varying degrees of success, to approximate this higher law. The higher law was unseen and unwritten. It was, nevertheless, the ultimate ordering principle of the universe and therefore the force of *right* underpinning all human law. This idea is reflected in the Germanic obsession with trial by combat or by ordeal.

“Ordeal” is derived from Old English *ordāl*. *Dāl* is a “division, allotment, or portion,”⁷³ while the prefix *or-* in this instance refers to something that is “original, early.” The *ordeal* therefore is an allotment of justice handed out by the mechanism of the cosmos or by the gods⁷⁴—or, in Christian terms, by “God.” This concept probably lies behind one of the many Anglo-Saxon names for the Christian God: *Metod*. In heathen times, this word was used to connote “fate, destiny, death,”⁷⁵ but probably was originally a name of the heathen god usually known as *Tīw*. *Metod* literally means “the Measurer,” or “the One Who Metes Out (justice, etc.).”

The degree to which these originally heathen ideas about the very *nature* of law continued unabated in Christian times (and beyond) is a testimony to the faith of the people in those concepts, not to mention their practical benefits. It should come as no surprise that these concepts underlie even modern Anglo-American legal systems. Although the idea of a trial by combat or trial by ordeal might seem “barbaric” today, it is at the root of the modern adversarial procedure in which two (now *verbal*) combatants fight for their clients.

Besides the theory of legal precedent and the adversarial procedure of adjudicating cases, there are many other modern legal concepts that survived from Anglo-Saxon times. Execution by *hanging* was a holdover from the sacrificial practice of dedicating prisoners of war to the god Wōden. This is where the famous Neolithic monument called “Stonehenge” gets its name. “Henge” is derived from OE *hengen*, “gallows; death by hanging,”⁷⁶ so the name **Stānhengen* simply means “stone-gallows,” suggesting the purpose it was used for by the Anglo-Saxons in that region of Britain when they encountered stiff resistance from Brittonic armies. The idea of awarding money to wronged parties was widely practiced in Germanic and especially Anglo-Saxon law. The award, in the case of manslaughter, was called *wergeld*, or “man-money.”

Legal concepts also provide the basis for political organization, and ideas of sovereignty and its exercise. The idea of “sacral kingship” inherited from heathen times seems to have continued in the early medieval Anglo-Saxon kingdoms under ostensibly Christian law.⁷⁷ The heathen kings had ruled based on their blood-ties with the high sovereign god, Wōden.⁷⁸ They had been the “high priests” as well as kings. In the early Christian period this relationship of sovereign and religious authority continued as the king was called *Christes gespelia* (“Christ’s

deputy”) and was bound by law “to avenge with the utmost diligence offenses against Christ.”⁷⁹ This is a concept that offered substance to the king’s legal role in early Christian England. The king, who had once interacted directly with the traditional gods (who were part of his “family”) now had to act through the intercession of the church. Nevertheless, the king was given a prominent place in the liturgical procedures of the Anglo-Saxon church. Formerly, the king’s power had been limited and guided by the consent of the *witan*—the council of aristocratic tribal leaders. Now that *other* force that balanced the sovereign power of the king was the church and its officials—based in another land and harboring international interests.

The key document for understanding the political structure and roles of various classes of society in late, and therefore most of medieval and Christianized England, is the “Institutes of Polity” by Bishop Wulfstan (ca. 1023).⁸⁰ This apparently Christian document has been analyzed by Chaney to reveal the underlying pre-Christian concept of kingship.⁸¹ The king’s power remained limited but it was still his responsibility to maintain the well-being of the folk by means of his virtually magical powers.

The Anglo-Saxon world was greatly influenced by the invasion of the Norse, which began around 800 CE. Legal institutions were subject to this influence as well. The idea of a jury made up of twelve men (*thegnas*, “thanes”), upon whose majority decision the resolution of legal cases depended, originated in the Danelaw. This was subsequently adopted throughout English law. The organization of regions under local assemblies, or *things*, was emphasized in the Danelaw and also spread throughout later medieval England.⁸²

Although the Norman Conquest caused great changes in English society—not the least being the wholesale displacement of the Anglo-Saxon nobility—most of the legal structures relevant to the majority of freemen seem to have continued unabated from Anglo-Saxon times.⁸³ Perhaps the willingness of the Norman-French to accept the legal institutions of England was ultimately rooted in the common ancestry shared by the once Viking Normans and the English and Norse inhabitants of England.

English Literature

The history of medieval English literature is sharply divided into two periods—the Anglo-Saxon period from the beginnings to 1066, and the Middle English period that followed. (More will be discussed about these linguistic periods in the section on language.) Though well behind Icelandic, Anglo-Saxon literature is the second richest literary corpus among the old Germanic literary traditions. There is a sizable body of both poetic and prose works.⁸⁴ The majority of this material is Christian in nature. The one notable exception is the most important single monument of Anglo-Saxon literature: *Beowulf*.⁸⁵

Beowulf is the English national epic—even though the action takes place back in Denmark. The legends from which the heroic mythology of *Beowulf* is drawn are purely heathen in origin, although the poem in its current form was obviously *composed* by a Christian sometime between 650 and 700 CE. The oldest manuscript dates from 1000 CE, but the material itself dates back to the Migration Age. The poem tells the story of Beowulf, a young hero who saves the court of King Hrothgar from a monster (and the latter’s even more terrible mother). It then recounts how, many years later, the now aged hero fights and kills, but is also killed by, a dragon. Allusions are made to other heroic material commonly handled by Germanic poets in the royal courts of the Migration Age. These include references to figures from the Dietrich cycle and from the Nibelungen cycle.⁸⁶

The courts of the Anglo-Saxon kings continued to cultivate and preserve much of the old heathen culture orally because their power to rule was based on their descent from Wōden. This cultivation of pre-Christian lore was a general feature of early medieval Germanic court life. The old heathen heroes exemplified the virtues that the kings admired, and which their retainers and warriors *necessarily* had to have in order to be successful in their roles. The *Beowulf* poem is merely a remnant of the older tradition, as are other shorter works such as *The Fight at Finnsburg*, *Deor*, *Widsith*, and *Waldere*.⁸⁷ Very little of this material was ever committed to writing, and much of what was written down did not survive the careless destruction of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts over centuries of neglect (ca. 1100–1500).

The Fight at Finnsburg is a fragment related to *Beowulf* that tells of Finn’s nighttime attack on the hall of Hnæf. *Deor* contains references to the misfortunes suffered by a variety of figures in old Germanic heroic tradition such as Wayland (Völundr), the rape of Beadohild (Böðvildr), the exile of Theodoric, and the tyranny of Ermanarich. In each instance the misfortune is endured and overcome. *Widsith*, which is the oldest example we have of Germanic verse in any language, is nevertheless a catalog of an already age-old tradition of Germanic legend and lore. In its mere 142 lines it enumerates seventy tribes and sixty-nine heroes—dating back to as early as the third century CE. *Waldere* is concerned with Walter of Aquitaine who was also the subject of a now lost Old High German poem, of which only a Latin translation (*Waltharius*) survives. These poems, like *Beowulf*, were composed and written in

ostensibly Christian times, and so represent a fragmentary body of evidence that reveals the extent to which pre-Christian cultural material was preserved in the secular world of the royal courts of Anglo-Saxon England.

With the Norman Conquest it was precisely this old Germanic court culture that was destroyed. Other aspects of English culture, most notably the legal structures, tended to remain intact. It was the Anglo-Saxon royal and linguistic culture that bore the brunt of the Conquest. (Note that current “British” royalty does not take into account the Anglo-Saxon kings as being historically kings of England!) The language of the court became French for around three hundred years. English itself continued to evolve. Although the common folk spoke no French, individual French words did creep into the language. It was only slowly that English made its way back to being a literary language. In the process of doing so, it lost its purely Germanic character and became a creole of Germanic (English and Scandinavian), French, and British themes and usages. The heroic works that can be found, such as the thirteenth-century *Historia Brutonum* (or *Brut*) by a parish priest named Layamon or the anonymous *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (from 1375), are not based on common Germanic themes. The *Brut* is ultimately drawn from Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*, and *Gawain* is clearly derived from Celtic folklore. The most Germanic work in Middle English is the *Lay of Havelok the Dane* (early twelfth century) which probably treats the figure of Óláfr Cuaran, a famous tenth-century Viking.

English Religion

The survival of pre-Christian elements in the religious beliefs and practices of the English follows along similar lines as the history of law and literature. Court culture in Anglo-Saxon times retained its Germanic character and mythic structure, but this was virtually destroyed by the Norman Conquest. This left only fragments to be gathered up in folklore—where the beliefs were sometimes admixed with Celtic and received motifs from the classical world.

Nowhere is this cultural syncretism more evident than in the struggle of the medieval English to arrive at a myth of their origins. There are three different ethnogenetic myths regarding the English in the Middle Ages:

1. Among the learned churchmen it became fashionable to trace their line of descent to Shem (a son of Noah). This was remarkable because most European nations were thought to descend from another son of Noah, Japhet.
2. Another myth, based on a story in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*, derived the English (now “British”) from Brutus, great-grandson of the Trojan Aeneas. This myth was very widespread and popular by the thirteenth century as testified to by the *Brut* of Layamon with its many extant manuscripts.
3. Finally, there was the myth of the Anglo-Saxon chieftains Hengest and Horsa (Stallion and Horse) who invaded Britain around 450 and founded what became the English nation.

These three myths reflect the three major tendencies in medieval culture as noted at the beginning of this chapter: learned Christianity, classical tradition, and native (in this case, Anglo-Saxon) tradition. In Christian mythology, all the nations of men were derived from the three sons of Noah: Shem, Ham, and Japhet. What is unusual about the English treatment of this myth is that the English were imagined to be descended from Shem, the same ancestor claimed by the Semites (Shemites). In biblical, or Christian, terms this may have been an effort to assume the role of an elect nation. The linkage of nations to the myth of the Trojan War, and hence to the Homeric tradition, is typical of learned medieval men. For reasons of national prestige, they wished to attach themselves to the glory of the classical world. The prototype of this is the *Aeneid* of Vergil (19 BCE). Finally, there is the native English “myth”—reported by both Bede⁸⁸ and Geoffrey of Monmouth (VI, 10)—that the brothers Hengist and Horsa came with three longships full of warriors (Angles, Saxons, and Jutes) from Germany. This was at the invitation of the British king Vortigern, and their mission was to restore order to the land that had fallen into lawlessness after the departure of the Romans around 400 CE. Of these myths, only the one of Hengist and Horsa is in any way supported by historical or archeological fact.

Although these myths have different points of genesis, and originated to fulfill different needs in English society, there were apparently efforts made to synthesize them. In some versions of the Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies, in which the kings were shown to descend from Woden, the name Scem (perhaps originally a scribal error for Sceaf?) appears. Here the Anglo-Saxons wished to link themselves to the chosen, priestly son of Noah. “To be descended from Shem was to belong to a royal sacerdotal and divine lineage and was a certain way . . . of translating into Christian terms of reference, the divine ancestry claimed by English kings—something which Woden, a downgraded pagan deity, could no longer endure.”⁸⁹ The importance of this myth is to re-establish a divine lineage that was *organic*. But these medieval confusions will result in awkward and problematic situations later on, such as the

British Israelite movement and the “Christian Identity” religion with its ambivalent attitudes toward actual Hebrews and Jews.⁹⁰

Knowledge and worship of the native English gods and goddesses survived throughout the Anglo-Saxon period. Mention of them in the extant literary remains is scant, but broad enough to give some idea of the areas in which the survival continued, for example, in magic and in the royal mythology. Another fascinating way in which the old gods seemed to have maintained their existence is in the form of Christian saints. Throughout the Middle Ages a syncretic religion of pagan and Christian elements was the cultural norm. This is no different than what we find today in areas of the globe that have only been Christianized for three to four hundred years, such as the Caribbean basin.

Of all the ancient Germanic gods, it is Wōden who survives in the Middle Ages most intact. One of the best-known examples of his presence in the Old English written record is in the eleventh-century *Nine Herbs Charm*.⁹¹ There we read:

*Pagenam Woden VIII wuldortanas,
sloh ða þa næddran þæt heo on VIII tofleah.*

(Then Wōden took nine glory-twigs, he then struck the adder so that it flew apart into nine [pieces].)

Heathen customs and beliefs continued, mixed with Christian and classical elements, even as laws against some of these practices were issued throughout the Anglo-Saxon period. Originally much of heathen practice and custom must have been grudgingly accepted by the early churchmen in England, as supported by Pope Gregory’s advice to Augustine (relayed in a letter to Abbot Mellitus [601 CE]) and recorded in Bede’s *History of the English Church and People* (I, 30). Gregory advises his missionaries not to destroy the heathen temples, but to reconsecrate them to the Christian God and thus allow the people to continue to worship in their accustomed places. We can conclude that a wholesale substitution of forms and a reinterpretation of values were undertaken in the medieval world. Just as the old sacred places were Christianized, heathen holy times became sacred to Christianity. For example, Yule (OE *geōl*) became Christmas, and Easter (the Anglo-Saxon spring festival *ēastre*) became a Christian festival commemorating the Resurrection. It is for this reason, perhaps, that the names of pagan gods, with the exception of Wōden, hardly survive.

Wōden’s name occurs at the head of every genealogy of the Anglo-Saxon kings.⁹² Regardless of the fact that the kings had converted to Christianity, it was still believed that their power to rule was derived from their divine ancestry. This is not surprising in the context of the Anglo-Saxon period. However, the tradition was perpetuated beyond that time as well. A thirteenth-century Latin manuscript, now found in Liège, shows an image of Wōden (Voden) with a fiery breath issuing from his mouth and entering the mouths of the kings of England.⁹³ This belief concerning a breath of light or fire is certainly of Germanic origin and is even mentioned in the Middle English *Lay of Havelok the Dane* as a sign of royal lineage.⁹⁴

In addition to such overt survivals of the pagan divinities—all of which must be regarded as the most minute fragments of evidence for what must have been known in the Middle Ages—the most prevalent signs of heathen survivals and continuity are found in the cult of the Christian saints. This was the subject of Ernst Jung’s 1922 study *Germanische Götter und Helden in christlicher Zeit*.⁹⁵ The “patron saint” of England is St. George. The historical St. George is a third-century martyr from Palestine. He is best known as a dragon-slayer. However, this legend about him was unknown before his cult was established in the Germanic world. The Germanic national heroes were all dragon-slaying warriors—Beowulf or Sigurðr—and so the “patron saint” would also have to be one as well.

The legend of St. George was well known in Anglo-Saxon sources. Bede’s *Martyrology* provides it, and it is repeated by Ælfric. A dragon with poison breath is terrorizing the countryside and has to be appeased each day with two sheep. But when the sheep run out, humans have to be substituted. The first human victim, chosen by lot, is the king’s daughter. She goes to the place of sacrifice dressed as a bride. The warrior George attacks the dragon, pierces it with his spear, and binds it with the girdle of the princess. George tells the people he will kill the dragon if they will be baptized, maintain churches, honor priests, and feed the poor. The oath is extracted and the dragon is slain. Clearly, this story has its genesis in the Greek tale of Perseus and Andromeda, but it was expanded and took on a life of its own in the Germanic world. George is the patron saint of soldiers, knights, archers, and armorers. His importance grew throughout the Middle Ages in England. Visions of him preceded the victory of the crusaders over the Saracens at Antioch, Richard the Lionheart (1189–1199) placed himself and his army under George’s protection, Edward III (1327–1377) founded the Order of the Garter under his patronage, and Henry V (1413–1422) invoked him for victory before the Battle of Agincourt (1415). His feast day became an important holiday. The medieval cult

of St. George clearly seems to have carried forward the mythology of a serpent-slaying warrior-hero from heathen times into the Middle Ages.

Another Anglo-Saxon saint with clear affinities to pagan themes is St. Oswald. Oswald was the king of Northumbria (633–641), and had been baptized at Iona while in exile. He returned to his land and defeated the British king Cadwalla. Before this battle he set up a wooden cross and had his troops pray for victory. His English army, much smaller than that of Cadwalla, won the day. Afterward he had monks brought from Iona to preach among his still-heathen people. The Ionian bishop Aidan was given the island of Lindisfarne to establish a monastery. In 641 Oswald was defeated in battle by the heathen king of Mercia, Penda. It is said that Penda sacrificed Oswald to Wōden and had his body dismembered, with the head, hands, and arms being hung up on poles. These relics were subsequently venerated as having miraculous powers, as were the spots on the ground where he died and where he had set up his cross before the battle of Hefenfēlp (Heavenly Field) near Hexham.

The legend of Oswald contains many pagan elements, which stem from different sources. He was a heathen himself, who only converted to Christianity as an adult. His name, like so many Anglo-Saxon names, has pagan connotations: *Ōs-wald*, “God’s-Ruler.” Here the word “god” is the common Germanic term **ansuz* (OE *ōs*, ON *áss*). The fact that he, as a man with blood ties to Wōden (he is a Wōden-descended king), would himself be sacrificed to Wōden was certainly not lost on the still quasi-heathen English. The miracles attributed to Oswald’s relics and to the places associated with him⁹⁶ often have a heathen air about them, such as the cure of a horse or power over fire.⁹⁷ But it is the legend of Oswald and his ravens that reveals most clearly the continuing belief that Oswald was Wōden or a Wōden-hero in disguise.

One medieval German source, the minstrel song of St. Oswald, contains the following:

*Als Oswalt and die Zinne kam
do sah er kommen einen Mann*



Fig. 4.4: Woodcut Depicting St. Oswald (1488)

zu seinem Hofe her der ging.
 Oswalt ihn würdiglich empfing
 er sprach: viel lieber Bruder mîn
 wie is der Name dîn?
 er sprach: ich heiße Tragemunt
 alle lant sind mir wol kund
 zwo und sibzig Zungen.⁹⁸

(As Oswald approached the fortress he saw a man coming who was going to the king's court. Oswald received him respectfully, [and] he spoke: "My very dear brother, what is your name?" He said: "I am called Tragemunt, all lands are known to me, and seventy-two tongues [= languages].")

Elsewhere, for example in a hagiography of 1488, it is clarified further that this man, described as a "pilgrim," had a long gray beard and carried a staff. The "pilgrim" claims to know all and be a soothsayer, who is familiar with seventy-two different countries (in other words, the whole world?). He tells Oswald that he knows that the king has had a raven for twelve years which was sent to him by "the Almighty." The old man in a gray coat has the raven brought to him and shows Oswald how the bird can speak in a human tongue; after this, the "pilgrim" disappears.

The iconography of St. Oswald often shows the king with two ravens, for example in the woodcut from the 1488 Nuremberg hagiography (Fig 4.4). Here we see King Oswald with a staff and attended by two ravens: one holds a ring in its beak, and the other holds a cup and has what appears to be a written tablet hung around its neck. Elsewhere there exists a sixteenth-century painting of Oswald's meeting with the pilgrim.⁹⁹ The iconography of these

scenes appears to be extremely archaic, with analogues in heathen art and literature. The fact that Oswald's cult was widespread beyond England, and that the heathen connotations persisted virtually into modern times, is an indication of the depth of these associations.

That paganism never fully died out among the Anglo-Saxons is amply testified to by the laws issued right up to the time of the Conquest, which prohibited specific heathen practices then in use among the people.¹⁰⁰ In the laws of King Cnut (1017–35), the last legal code of the Anglo-Saxon period, we read a specific prohibition against “the worship of idols, heathen gods, and the sun or the moon, fire or water, springs or stones or any kind of forest trees, or indulgence in witchcraft, or the compassing of death in any way, either by sacrifice or by divination.”¹⁰¹ Such practices were originally part of the royal cult and were progressively submerged into folk belief and folk practice, where they probably remained relatively undisturbed. The royal Anglo-Saxon culture, which was a matrix of Germanic spiritual ideology on many levels, was effectively displaced to the lower echelons of society by the events of 1066.

Anglo-Saxon Language

The Old English language, as it is recorded in texts dating from the eighth to the eleventh century, was a remarkable linguistic instrument. It is a monument of Germanic thought and the organization of thought. Even modern English retains much of the phonology (sound system) and syntax (word order) of this ancient tongue. While the Germans and even most Scandinavians have lost the distinctive Germanic sounds [th] and [w], modern English has retained them. The very structure and mode of handling ideas inherent in the language as it developed in early medieval England is a testament to the Germanic peoples' genius for synthesizing foreign ideas and making them their own.

The achievement of the medieval English wordsmiths lies in their craft of making new concepts, such as those introduced with Christianity, intelligible almost entirely within the organic structure of the native tongue. They were well on their way to developing a truly philosophical language that contained only a few Latin loan-words. Modern English borrows words wholesale from other languages (e.g., *Trinity* or *karma*) or creates them from foreign elements (e.g., *television*, *computer*) as new ideas or objects are introduced, or simply for the sake of the prestige that comes with exoticism. The medieval English wordsmiths, who worked in both ecclesiastical and secular cultural environments, took another approach.

There were a number of words (ca. 450) that were borrowed from Latin or Greek (mainly through Gothic), such as *biscop*, “bishop” (< Lat. *episcopus*); *carte*, “paper, document” (< Lat. *charta*); and *regol*, “rule” (< Lat. *regula*). But these were relatively rare. It was much more common to create a new English word for a new idea by combining two well-known words into a new meaning, for example *tungol-craeft* (“star-craft” = astronomy), *Prīnes* (= “Three-ness” = Trinity), *god-spel* (“good-spell [news]” = *evangelium*). This method of creating new words was ancient and can be seen in the poetic practice of creating kennings, or circumlocutions, for otherwise well-known things; for example, a ship becomes a *brim-hengest* (“brine-stallion”). There is also the peculiarly Germanic mode of creating new words from stems by altering their stem vowels. This will be discussed further in the section on Scandinavian language. The practice of generating abstract meanings from more concrete stem-words by adding prefixes and suffixes would be exercised in late medieval German—whence it helped transform German into a great philosophical language in the following centuries. Old English was developing along similar lines several centuries earlier. It is likely that the linguistic practices of the Anglo-Saxon missionaries of the eighth century in Germany were quickly absorbed by the Germans. There are dozens of these affixes used on nouns, adjectives, and verbs.¹⁰² With such affixes, abstract meanings could be implied. For example, by combining the adjective *sōþ* “true, real,” with the suffix *-nes*, the noun *sōþnes* is created, which conveyed the meaning “truth, justice.” The word for “girl,” *mægd*, with the addition of the suffix *-hād*, results in a new term *mægdhād*, “virginity.” This kind of Germanic word-building practice continued in modern German, but virtually died out in English following the Norman Conquest.

Germanic linguistic elements were often reinforced by the language of the Danish invaders and settlers in the north and east of England. From about 850 to 1050, nearly half of England was dominated culturally by Scandinavians, many of whom intermarried with the English. On a popular level the two dialects, English and Scandinavian, were thoroughly intermixed *throughout all of England* by 1066. The language of the Old English manuscripts was most often a formal scribal language which did not account for colloquialisms and it conserved written forms that had disappeared in speech. That Scandinavian words and usage had thoroughly interpenetrated English is demonstrated by the great number of Scandinavian words, names, and place names that occur in the Middle English period.¹⁰³ One example of this is Middle English *spā* (< ON *spá*, “prophecy”). This word does not occur in Old English, but only appears in the Middle English period. This does not mean that the word was unknown before 1066, but only that it was never recorded in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts.

It should be noted that the survival of the pagan god-name in the appellation of the fifth weekday, Thursday, is dependent on a Scandinavian form of Þórr. The Old English form of the god's name is Þunor, which resulted in *Punresdæg* in Old English and even *Punresdai* in Middle English, which existed alongside Old English *Þūresdæg* and Middle English *Pursdei*.¹⁰⁴ As already indicated, the Germanic god-names survived in the English weekday names, and pagan names of festivals for midwinter (*geōl*/Yule) and spring (Easter) were continued. Personal names likewise appear to have remained highly conservative. For the most part, the English resisted the use of what would have been "Christian names" and retained many names that contained references to the heathen gods: examples include those beginning with *ōs*- ("god"), like *Ōswald* and *Ōsmund*, and those of Scandinavian origin using the name of Þórr, such as *Thurman* (< Þórmundr) and *Thurgood* (< Þórkell). The likely reason that these names were retained is connected to the traditional Germanic concepts concerning the rebirth of the souls of dead ancestors in newborn children. It was believed that the *name* either effected or confirmed the rebirth process. Therefore, the ancestral names could not be rejected without rejecting the souls of the ancestors. The idea of this rejection was abhorrent even to the early "converts" to Christianity.

Anglo-Saxon Material Culture

Medieval Anglo-Saxon material culture can lay claim to many of the most magnificent pieces of surviving Germanic art. Its splendor is directly derived from the principles of Germanic aesthetics that it exemplifies. The most outstanding examples of Anglo-Saxon art are to be found in the areas of metalwork, sculpture, and manuscript illumination. All of these crafts tend to be exercises in similar design principles and iconography, and these principles have their roots in heathen Germanic traditions of design.



Fig. 4.5: Sutton Hoo shoulder clasp

The metalwork of the Anglo-Saxons was both functional and decorative. Among the examples of functional pieces, none is more representative than the magnificent Anglo-Saxon sword.¹⁰⁵ Not only was it a strong, flexible weapon in battle, it was often beautifully decorated with cloisonné inlays of red garnet and other stones. Examples of art preserved in the Sutton Hoo gravesite (600–650) show not only exquisite workmanship but also carry on the Germanic aesthetic tradition. This is also apparent in the early medieval Anglo-Saxon period in the craft of sculpting in stone—especially in the creation of stone crosses, which continued the use of abstract interlaces and motifs of fantastic beasts.¹⁰⁶

The principles of design present in so much early medieval manuscript illumination have often been popularly and wrongly designated as being “Celtic.” While various Celtic motifs are often instrumental to this style of art, it is incorrect to ascribe it entirely to Celtic designers. More recent scholarship calls this decorative style “Hiberno-Saxon,” that is, a synthesis of Irish and English cultural ideas. The mature examples of this style all originate in Northumbria, or northern England. Although some original impetus can be traced to Ireland, the art form is really the product of Anglo-Saxon Northumbria. Regarding its origins, Nordenfalk concludes: “the Anglo-Saxons [brought] new ornamental motifs . . . but they also had a specific genius for order and clarity, and this they combined with a

fresh inventiveness which the Irish seemingly did not possess to the same degree.”¹⁰⁷ The Germanic style is most conspicuous in the ribbon-like animal motifs, which are often woven into interlace decoration. This aesthetic, like so much of Anglo-Saxon culture, was essentially Germanic and it was almost entirely lost in the post-Conquest High Middle Ages.

On one level, England was a multicultural society in the Middle Ages. Germanic, Celtic, and Scandinavian peoples bearing ideas from northern and southern Europe converged there. After 1066 this milieu was injected with Norman French culture. This new element displaced the essentially Germanic royal court culture of the old Anglo-Saxon nobility. With this, the intertribal network of Germanic ideology—shared with Scandinavia and Germany—was submerged. Up until the point at which this submersion occurred, however, Germanic culture had continually left its stamp on early medieval (Christian) Anglo-Saxon England for almost four hundred years in the fields of literature, language, and art—but most especially in the sphere of law and politics. Toward the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, of course, England became a part of a great pan-Scandinavian cultural empire under the Danish kings Cnut and Harald I. It is in Scandinavia that the pagan ways lingered the longest and strongest.

Scandinavia

In Scandinavia, the old ways hung on through the Middle Ages with much greater persistence than anywhere else. However, the vast area and the remoteness of this region present special problems to this investigation. The success of any Christianization efforts came to this region much later (between 900 and 1100), after Christianity itself had to a great extent been Germanized in Germany and England. From a cultural standpoint, Scandinavia must also be considered as two separate areas: (1) the European region, comprising present-day Denmark, Sweden, and Norway; and (2) Iceland and the Faeroe Islands. The continental regions were, of course, much more directly affected by European cultural patterns to the south. Iceland, and more remote areas in the North Atlantic such as the Faeroes and Greenland, were relatively isolated—and therefore they tended to conserve older forms of culture on all levels. Ironically, Iceland, which for most of its history was dominated by foreign powers, actually outshines the rest of Scandinavia when it comes to cultural studies. This has had unfortunate results, as such treasures that might exist on the continent are sometimes ignored in favor of Icelandic material. In this section I will try to provide some balance to this situation. The whole of medieval Scandinavia, and especially Iceland, preserves so many archaic Germanic cultural features for essentially two reasons: (1) Christianity came to the region late and in an already Germanized form, and (2) Scandinavia had never been Romanized in ancient times.

Continental Scandinavia

Historical events in Scandinavia during the dawn of the Middle Ages were largely influenced by geography. Scandinavia—falsely called an island in ancient geographies—is nevertheless for all practical purposes almost entirely cut off from the rest of Europe by water. Only Jutland is fully connected to the continent—and only by a narrow strip of land. For the Scandinavians themselves, this water was a highway for gaining access to the rest of the world. But for Europe, it was a moat. The historical process of Christianizing Scandinavia took a full two hundred years. The time between the consolidation of the Christianization process (50–100 years after the *official* conversions) and the Reformation (ca. 1530) can meaningfully be called the Scandinavian Middle Ages. Cultural evidence for continental Scandinavia during this period is relatively sparse when compared to the rest of Europe, or to Iceland. However, there are rich veins of information that can be mined for those who know where to look.

Scandinavian Law and Politics

Scandinavian ideas of law were extremely archaic and enduring. The particular forms of Scandinavian legal theories and practices not only persisted in Scandinavia proper, but were exported, especially to the islands of the west including Iceland and the Isle of Man. In ancient, pre-Christian times the legal assemblies (*þing*) were opportunities for the expression of the whole culture: religious ceremonies were observed, laws were recited, legal disputes were settled, and business was conducted. With Christianization the assemblies become progressively more specialized as simply *legal* institutions.

The *þing* is an institution common throughout Scandinavia. It received representatives from a given region and eventually from the whole nation. As the importance of monarchy grew after the advance of Christianity in the thirteenth century, the king's representatives also grew in stature. The number of representatives tended to become smaller as the power of the monarchy increased. However, throughout the Middle Ages, the power of the *þing* remained strong and no king could circumvent it. Royal authority was principally exercised through the assemblies.

In this regard, Scandinavian tradition relied heavily on archaic Germanic ideas concerning the limits of royal power and authority.

Medieval royal authority was instituted in the customs surrounding the *hirð*, or royal retinue. While the *þing* represented the sovereign power of the people, the royal *hirð*, which formed a political counterpart to the *þing*, also rested on ancient customs. These customs became more and more formal and rule-bound in the Christian Middle Ages. The most elaborate recorded code for the organization of the *hirð* is the thirteenth-century Norwegian *Hirðskrá*.¹⁰⁸ There can be little doubt that both the *hirð* and the *þing* represented continuations of pre-Christian institutions, even if particulars of the laws were constantly changing so that no specific part of the laws can be identified as archaic or pre-Christian.

Scandinavian Literature

Very little continental Scandinavian literature from the Middle Ages survives—or perhaps very little of it was ever produced. Until around 1100 Norway and Iceland formed a single intellectual culture and much of what was eventually recorded and preserved in Iceland was actually of Norwegian provenance. From the twelfth century, Norway became more fully integrated with the rest of Scandinavia and its literary glories faded. I will discuss this whole Old West Norse literature in the separate section about Iceland to follow. The major literary products of Scandinavia that preserve—and to some extent perhaps reawaken—the heathen past are the many ballads and folk tales (probably generated in the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries) and the monumental Latin work *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus.

In the beginning of the Scandinavian Middle Ages, the Latin language dominated literary production and only slowly was the vernacular Norse tongue able to assert itself as a literary language. The tendency, of course, was for Latin to be used for ecclesiastical works, while the vernacular was increasingly employed for secular purposes—the recording of laws, chronicles, and ballads.

The earliest examples of the use of the native tongue for written records are found in the runic inscriptions.¹⁰⁹ Obviously, these date back into heathen times, but in the beginning phases of Christianity in Scandinavia the runic tradition was still in use. The majority of the more elaborate runic inscriptions were executed in a nominally Christian cultural context.¹¹⁰ The inscriptions, many of which contain poetic formulas,¹¹¹ often include a prayer to God to “help the soul” of the one memorialized—and even of the living person who later reads the runes. The carver of one Gotlandic stone (G 134, Sjonhem) could not refrain from asking God to avenge the death of the person the stone was intended to memorialize: “God help Rodfos’s soul. God fail those who failed him!”¹¹² Such testimonies to the mixed faith of Scandinavia throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries are common in the runic inscriptions—which are, after all, the most direct and concrete evidence we have about the thoughts of the folk in question.

In the Middle Ages, vernacular chronicles were not uncommon. The best known and most important of these is the Swedish *Erikskrönika* (“Chronicle of Erik”) from the middle of the fourteenth century. It is a rhymed record of the kings who reigned in Sweden between 1220 and 1320, and portrays the heroic and aristocratic virtues of the secular court. The popularity of such secular works is confirmed by the fact that the first book printed in Danish (1495) was the *Rimkrönike* (“Rhymed Chronicle”) in which each of the kings is made to recite his own story. Such works typically impart the heroic warrior ethic of the indigenous aristocracy, but demonstrate little in the way of consciously preserving pre-Christian ideas.

Overtly native and heathen concepts are best preserved in the ballads and various kinds of folk tales from Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Although these were often recorded much later in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, internal evidence seems to indicate that a large body of them originated in the 1200s–1300s, and that of these a certain group of “warrior ballads” and others go back to heathen models.¹¹³ These narrative ballads were composed in conjunction with music for the round dance and chain dance which became fashionable in twelfth-century Denmark.¹¹⁴ These dancing styles had their origins in France, but most of the narrative material in the ballads was of Scandinavian origin. This fashion continued for some four hundred years, when it fell out of favor with the aristocracy in the sixteenth century. Remarkably, however, the verses were collected by aristocratic women, who wrote them down in their poetry books.¹¹⁵ The first printed editions appeared in 1591 in Denmark. These works were not “folk poetry,” but rather courtly creations that were later adopted by the common folk.

The most overtly heathen of these ballads is “Thor of Asgard,” which is based on a myth also reflected in the “Þrymskviða” in the *Poetic Edda*. The ballad begins:

*Thet vor Tord aff Haffsgaard,
rider offer di grønne ennge:*

*tapte hand sin hammer aff guld,
oc borthen vor hand saa linge.*¹¹⁶

(It was Thor of Asgard,
who rides over the green fields:
he lost his hammer of gold,
and it was missing for so long.)

What is most noteworthy about this ballad is not so much that it was composed in the thirteenth or fourteenth century—such mythological works were, after all, common in Iceland at the time—but that similar ballads continued to be performed and recorded up until the early modern period. Danish ballads also tell of Siward (Sigurðr) and Didrek (Dietrich/ Þiðrekr) and record narratives about rune magic and dragon-slaying.

Besides the ballads there is a vast body of folklore that often incorporates and perpetuates ancient beliefs and cultural patterns. The *folkviser* (Swe. *folkvisor*) are ballads and folk tales, many of which are based on native beliefs and include references to trolls, giants, and magical events. The *folksagn* (“legends”) are tales based on real people and places, which have taken on legendary connotations over time. *Peer Gynt* is an example of such a legend. *Folkeventyr* (“fairy tales”) are completely imaginary stories that were subject to continual revision as they were handed down orally from generation to generation.¹¹⁷ It is therefore impossible to say that they were entirely *medieval*. However, their history and contents suggest a point of “origin” (if such a term can be used for something as organic as a folk tale) in the Middle Ages, during the time when the lines between paganism and Christianity were rather blurred. The fact that this worldview became fixed in the popular mind and was somehow perpetuated through the intervening centuries appears to be important. It would of course be rediscovered by the Romantics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Although it is *generally* true that native material of the national traditions tended to be recorded in the vernacular languages, one glaring exception is the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus. This work was written in Latin over a span of time from 1185 to 1222. At first glance it may appear to be a historical chronicle of the type created by Jordanes or Paulus Diaconus. However, the first nine books of Saxo’s work are entirely formed from mythic “history”—often pieced together from Old Norse poetic sources. Saxo’s sources date back as far as the fourth century and also include the “Amleth Saga,” from which Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is derived. Saxo collected, translated, and *revised* the stories to fit his agenda. It has often been assumed that his main impetus as a historian was rooted in a Christian motive. But once his agenda is fully understood, his work can be used reliably as a source and as corroborative evidence for older North Germanic traditions. The nature of Saxo’s agenda is, however, not as simple as one might imagine. In a standard reference book on Scandinavian literature we read: “Saxo had a definite purpose in mind when he wrote his Danish history covering a period of two thousand years. He wanted to demonstrate to the world that Denmark was an ancient country with old traditions, and he was inspired by a feeling of patriotism, centered on the king as the symbol of national unity.”¹¹⁸ Thus it can be inferred that Saxo was motivated as much by pro-Danish nationalism as he was by religious considerations. Therefore, if the work is to be considered as an example of learned propaganda, Saxo is making the case for the prestige of the ancient Danish traditions to the international, Latin-reading world even more than he is making points for Christianity against lingering pagan sympathies in his own country. In a sense, then, Saxo can just as easily be called a crypto-pagan as he can a Christian apologist.

Scandinavian Religion

It will be recalled that the chronological definition of what we mean by the “Middle Ages” hinges on a religious-historical criterion. The Middle Ages can be said to begin with the (at least nominal) ascent of Christian authority. Because this had its onset in Scandinavia as much as 700 years later than in the heart of Europe, and the termination of the medieval period occurs around 1500, it can be seen that the Middle Ages were far shorter in Scandinavia than in the rest of Europe. In general, a greater awareness of pagan traditions distinguished Scandinavia from Germany or England, and such traditions survived in greater abundance there as well.

One of the main avenues for the survival of paganism was through the expected syncretism between native patterns of behavior and values and Christian symbols and external forms. Kings who had been canonized, such as St. Olaf of Norway (who ruled between 1015 and 1030) or St. Erik of Sweden (who ruled between 1156 and 1160), took on many pagan attributes in the folk beliefs and practices that surrounded their persons. St. Olaf bashes trolls with his cross, just as Þórr had done with his hammer, and an image of St. Erik is transported in a wagon through the fields to bring fertility just as the image of Freyr had been ritually transported in the pagan past.¹¹⁹ During the Middle

Ages a procession went forth from Uppsala on 18 May (St. Erik's Day) in which the banner of St. Erik was borne *att helga Fruchten medh på Jorden* ("to sanctify the fruits of the earth"). St. Lucia's Day (13 December) originally coincided with the winter solstice in Scandinavia. St. Lucia is clearly intended as a standin for a pagan goddess of light. Yearly festivals and customs surrounding the major events in life—birth, marriage, death—are usually connected to some aspect of prehistoric belief in Scandinavia.¹²⁰

Beliefs and practices embedded in folklore which are clearly derived from pagan sources must have been even stronger in the Middle Ages before the common folk were educated about the ways and doctrines of Christianity. Many of these beliefs are consciously thought to go back to extremely ancient times—but as the Middle Ages progressed, people increasingly lost sight of the historical distinction between pagan and Christian. Subsequently, features of native heathen origin could be given rationales within a form of folk-Christianity.

The "wild hunt" or "furious host" is an extremely archaic feature of Indo-European belief, and it is well represented in Scandinavian folklore.¹²¹

In Sweden, the hunt is said to be led by "Oden"—which is apparently derivative of Óðinn. The ghostly apparition of the huntsman and his companions can be observed in the night sky during various holidays. A Christian explanation has it that Oden was a hunter who broke the Sabbath by hunting on Sunday, and thus his punishment is to hunt for all eternity.

Norwegian folk tales are dominated by beliefs in the *huldfolk*—the "hidden people" and trolls in the countryside and in household spirits such as the *nisser* and *tompter* at home and on the farmstead. These are clearly beliefs derived from older pre-Christian traditions about *álfar* and *dvergjar* that remained vibrant in the Middle Ages and beyond. Some of these tales were accounted for with Christian explanations—we are told, for example, that the *huldfolk* were children Eve hid from God because she was ashamed of having them so late in life!¹²² In general the folktales bear witness to the degree to which beliefs about the entities and forces that inhabit the world continued from pre-Christian times. This continuity was not static, however. Ideas continuously evolved, and developed away from archaic patterns, as time passed.

Certainly one of the most powerful examples of the survival of the heathen spiritual world is found in ideas concerning the "soul" and its powers and faculties. There is evidence to suggest that these ideas were more precise and more complex before the coming of Christianity, with its simplistic structure of "body-soul-spirit." However, there remained a rich vocabulary for describing the spiritual faculties, for example, the *hug* ("mind"), *ham* ("shape"), *vård* ("guardian"), or *stora tankar* ("big thoughts"). We know about these concepts because of the role they play in folklore narratives.¹²³ Even if one wants to believe a given folk tale is an exercise in "pure imagination," the way in which storytellers make their narratives *plausible* is by bolstering them with believable motivations and explanations. This underlying *psychology*, or understanding of the spiritual and mental world of the people, remained rooted in ancient heathen models throughout the Middle Ages—and for many years thereafter.

The archaic psychology, or soul-lore, and the beliefs and practices surrounding the supernatural entities populating the home, farmstead, and countryside, taken together constituted an ongoing traditional alternative to established Christianity. Through the centuries these traditions became more and more Christianized, but in the Middle Ages they were still quite strong.

Nowhere is the slow transition between paganism and Christianity more pronounced than in the record of magical material. What started out as something purely pagan became mixed with Christian and other Mediterranean or Middle Eastern elements in medieval times until eventually no overtly pre-Christian features remained. I will return to this question when I discuss the situation in medieval Iceland. However, as an example of what is meant, spell number 45 of the *Galdrabók*, penned in Denmark in the 1600s, reads in conclusion: *Og bid fyre dyrleek stor Macht Grassens og krafftines Loterne at till Lagde Gudenum Rafell Mechtigste sijn penes Mand och hand sýnes sig hier i dine Mechtigste Nauffn tor frich Belsebub odin* ("And then ask on account of the gloriously great might of the herb and the never-ending working of its power, that the gods will send as help Raphael, their mightiest servant, and he will show himself here in thy mightiest names: Þórr, Frigg, Beelzebub, Óðinn").¹²⁴ The mixture of Hebraic and Germanic names is by no means rare in such manuscripts and is indicative of the long period of mixed tradition. Interestingly, the orthography of the original indicates that it was transcribed from the Icelandic by a Dane not fully familiar with the Icelandic language.

There are many clues that suggest the medieval period in Scandinavia was one in which the old ways continued unabated in many areas of life. It also remains true that for Denmark, Norway, and Sweden the amount of material actually recorded in the Middle Ages was relatively sparse. For this we are largely dependent on evidence collected by folklorists in the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries.

Scandinavian Languages

In the medieval period the languages of Scandinavia underwent many transformations, both internally and under the influence of Low German after the fourteenth century. This influence was due to the economic domination of the region by German trade associations after the twelfth century. Around 1000, the North Germanic dialect was developing an east/west division, with Denmark and Sweden manifesting a distinctive East Norse dialect, while Norway and Iceland developed the West Norse dialect. The East Norse dialects began to distinguish between Old Danish and Old Swedish as early as 1050, while the West Norse dialects of Old Icelandic and Old Norwegian did not diverge until the thirteenth century.

The Scandinavian languages remained conservative with regard to the terminology relevant to many of the old traditions. All of them maintained the names of the heathen deities in connection with the names of the days of the week (e.g., Danish *tirsdag*, *onsdag*, *torsdag*, *fredag*). Notably, the name of the god Óðinn remained. Under Christian influence, this had been replaced in many dialects of German with the innocuous *Mittwoch*. More important, however, are the technical names of the many entities and soul-concepts inherited from pagan times. This is an extraordinarily rich vocabulary of terms that includes words such as *troll* (“evil supernatural creature”), *draug* (“ghost”), *jotun* (“giant”), *fylge* (“attendant spirit”), *vård* (“guardian spirit”), *ham* (“shape”), and *hug* (“mind”). These verbal monuments bear testimony to the longstanding survival of pre-Christian ideas among the people throughout the Middle Ages. In the case of the Scandinavian evidence, we not only have the terms themselves, but we also have a myriad of *narratives* that give them context. These are enshrined in the continental Scandinavian languages to an extent second only to that of Iceland.

Scandinavian Material Culture

Some of the most magnificent examples of the survival of pre-Christian aesthetics and design are to be found in medieval continental Scandinavia. These come in two main categories: stave churches and runestones. While the former are best represented in Norway, the latter are more prevalent in Sweden and especially in Uppland. Both offer examples of art with a clearly Christian intent, which can nevertheless trace its aesthetic and iconographic origins to pre-Christian roots.

Stave or wooden churches were the earliest ones built in Scandinavia. They were built by local craftsmen using local materials and techniques. Their purpose was sacred, and therefore it can be expected that they would imitate features of the sacred temple architecture of late Viking Age Scandinavia. Very often churches were built directly over the ruins of destroyed heathen sanctuaries. Some twenty-nine stave churches survive in Norway today—as lasting reminders of the glories of traditional national aesthetics. The only danger currently posed to this heritage seems to be misguided and woefully ignorant youths, often styling themselves “heathens,” who have been known to burn these priceless cultural treasures as acts of “protest”!¹²⁵ This is ironic, in part, because the pre-Christian aspects of these buildings are numerous.

Their overall structure and design owes its origin to the woodcraft practiced by Viking Age Scandinavians, and their construction techniques closely resemble those used in Viking ships. This strength and flexibility has in part accounted for the fact that so many of these wooden structures have survived for many hundreds of years. The churches are often decorated with carvings of either an abstract (Fig. 4.6) or representational nature (Fig. 4.7), which often demonstrate links to pre-Christian aesthetics and mythology. These can be safely thought to have somehow undergone a degree of *interpretatio Christiana* in order for them to be so boldly emblazoned on the church edifice itself. The use of zoomorphic (probably serpentine) decoration on the gables and roof-ridges (see Fig. 4.8) is also suggestive of pre-Christian iconography. We know from accounts found in the Icelandic laws that the serpent-heads, or “dragons,” on the prows of Viking ships had the effect of driving off malevolent spiritual entities. The laws mandated the removal of these sculptures before approaching Iceland, to avoid disturbing the country’s famous protective *landvættir* (land-wights).¹²⁶ This is a clear indication of the “magical,” apotropaic, function of the serpents. The possibility that this iconography affected the development of monstrous sculpture in Gothic stone architecture in France, Germany, and Spain has already been mentioned.¹²⁷



Fig. 4.7: Sigurd motifs on portals from the Hylestad stave church, Norway

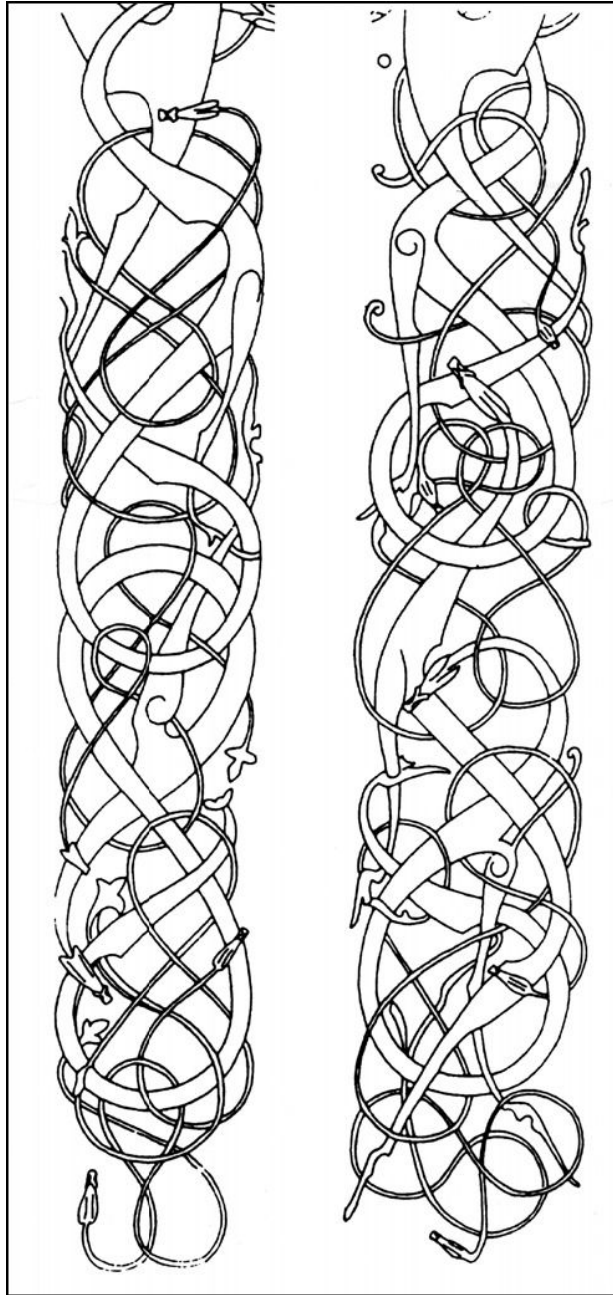


Fig. 4.6: Serpentine motifs on the Urnes Church, Norway;

A vast number of runestones are of obviously Christian intent and character. Many of them are emblazoned with a cross-motif ([Fig. 4.9](#)) and explicitly mention what must be interpreted to be the Christian God. Yet here too is the ubiquitous serpent-motif. It would appear most reasonable to conclude that the serpent is meant to protect the soul of the dead, rather than having any “evil” connotations that one might expect from purely Christian iconography. The practice of carving runic monuments originated in pagan times and is a cultural feature that continued well into the early Christian period. For this reason, it is clearly a practice imbued with heathen characteristics.





Fig. 4.8: Dragon-head sculptures on the Fantoft stave church (replica), Norway

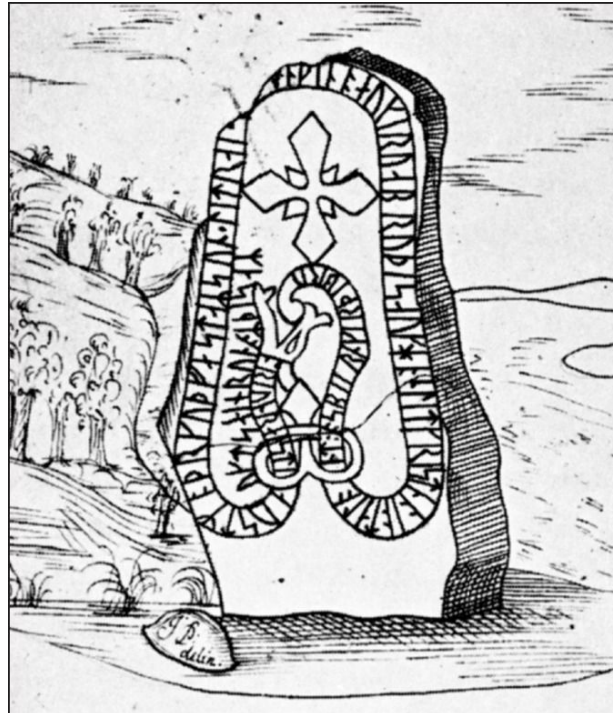


Fig. 4.9: A 17th-century drawing of the Frösö Stone from Jämtland, Sweden, with cross and serpent motifs

Pre-Christian cultural features continued after the initial Christianization of continental Scandinavia in the tenth through the eleventh centuries and there were also areas in which pre-Christian features were reawakened in the twelfth to thirteenth centuries, after a few generations of nominal church domination. The most significant areas of continuity were the legal and political systems and the beliefs and practices embedded in folklore. The renewal of interest in the literature and oral heritage of the north evidenced in the work of Saxo Grammaticus must be counted as an aspect of the early Northern Renaissance. This is in part because the material he utilized was to a large extent derived from what had been preserved in Iceland rather than in Denmark itself. It was in Iceland where the great body of old Germanic mythological lore found its final haven, and it was there that it weathered the Christian storm.

Iceland

Isolation from the mainstream of European social movements was the key to the cultural history of this remote island. It was the prospect of such isolation that attracted many settlers in the first place, and which also accounted for much of Iceland's cultural conservatism—especially in the area of linguistics. The original settlers in the late ninth century cultivated the verbal arts to the extent that they could be described as a literary elite. Despite the fact that these early Icelanders could only write in runes, they composed and memorized poems that could be written down verbatim hundreds of years later. It will be remembered from [Chapter Three](#) that Iceland “converted” to Christianity by the legislative decision of their Althing, or parliament. This kind of conversion, coupled with the island's cultural

conservatism, resulted in an extraordinarily lackadaisical Christianization process, largely devoid of the missionary zeal found elsewhere. This must be understood in order to comprehend subsequent developments in the Middle Ages. In terms of its political structure, legal practices, literary tradition, religious and magical ideology, as well as in linguistic forms, Iceland remained extraordinarily resilient in preserving its traditional culture.

Icelandic Law and Politics

In terms of political organization, Iceland was always a republic. Its republican ideas had been inherited from Norway and were rooted in archaic regional political structures. Sovereign power was exercised by chieftains who owned the farms and pastures they lived on. These estates could be vast in sparsely populated regions. In Iceland this evolved into a more legally based, rather than a land-based, focus of power. The chieftains were called *goðar* (singular: *goði*), a term connected to the word for “a god,” and hence an office which connoted both religious and political authority. The term *goði* is also known to be pre-Christian: it is found in the fifth-century runic inscription of Nordhuglo (Norway) in the older form *gudija*.¹²⁸ The lack of division between ecclesiastical and secular roles is another clear sign of the archaic structure of Icelandic society.

These patterns of political organization, established in heathen times, continued relatively unaffected by Christianity until the time of Iceland’s entrance into the kingdom of Norway in the 1260s. At that time the sovereignty of the Norwegian king was represented in Iceland by two *lögmen*n (“law-men”), a *fógeti* (“bailiff”), and *valdsmenn* (“sheriffs”) who stood between the Icelandic *lögrétta* (“Law-Council”) and the king. The *lögrétta* has been in continuous existence throughout the over 1,000 years of Icelandic history. In general, the medieval Icelandic constitutional system was structured in accordance with Figure 4.10. It should be noted that the addition of the two Icelandic bishops among the members of the Law-Council is the only Christian feature of the system. It can be safely assumed that the constitutional structure of early medieval Iceland reflects structures inherited from more archaic times.

The Althing was held annually in late summer. At this assembly the law was recited—a third of it each year—from atop the *Lögberg* (Law-Rock) by the *lögsögumaðr* (law-speaker). In pre-Christian times this was done from memory. The legislative and judicial functions were divided as shown in Figure 4.10. The *goðar* from the various districts of the country each brought two men with them as representatives. The “Fifth Court” adjudicated cases not resolved by the courts held in the spring assemblies a few months earlier. The allegiance of *þingmenn* was not strictly determined by geographical boundaries. These freemen had free choice as to which *goði* they would follow.

Certain ideas stand out in this system. First, sovereign power is vested in the impersonal idea of the law. Access to the law is expansive and flexible in such a republic—but it was not universal and as a matter of fact universal access was not seen as an ideal. Justice was exercised and law was used to determine right and wrong in given cases (more often, however, it was utilized to mediate between conflicting parties). The ability to carry out sentences was not assumed by the “state,” but rather was administered by the aggrieved parties themselves. Individuals could be exiled from the protection of the law and declared “outlaws” for life (*skóggangr*) or for three years (*fjörbaugsgarðr*). Alternately, compensation (*bætr*) could be demanded to satisfy the wronged party.

The genius of the Icelandic political and legal system is that it codified and made formal many of the customary republican tendencies of primitive Germanic law and perpetuated and maintained these ideas in continuous practice over a number of centuries. Ancient ideas of blood-vengeance (ON *hefnd*)—by which the “luck” (ON *hamingja*) stolen by murderers from the family of the victim was restored—were formalized into a system that involved the calling of witnesses, findings of fact, and readings of judgment. The archaic model remained intact.

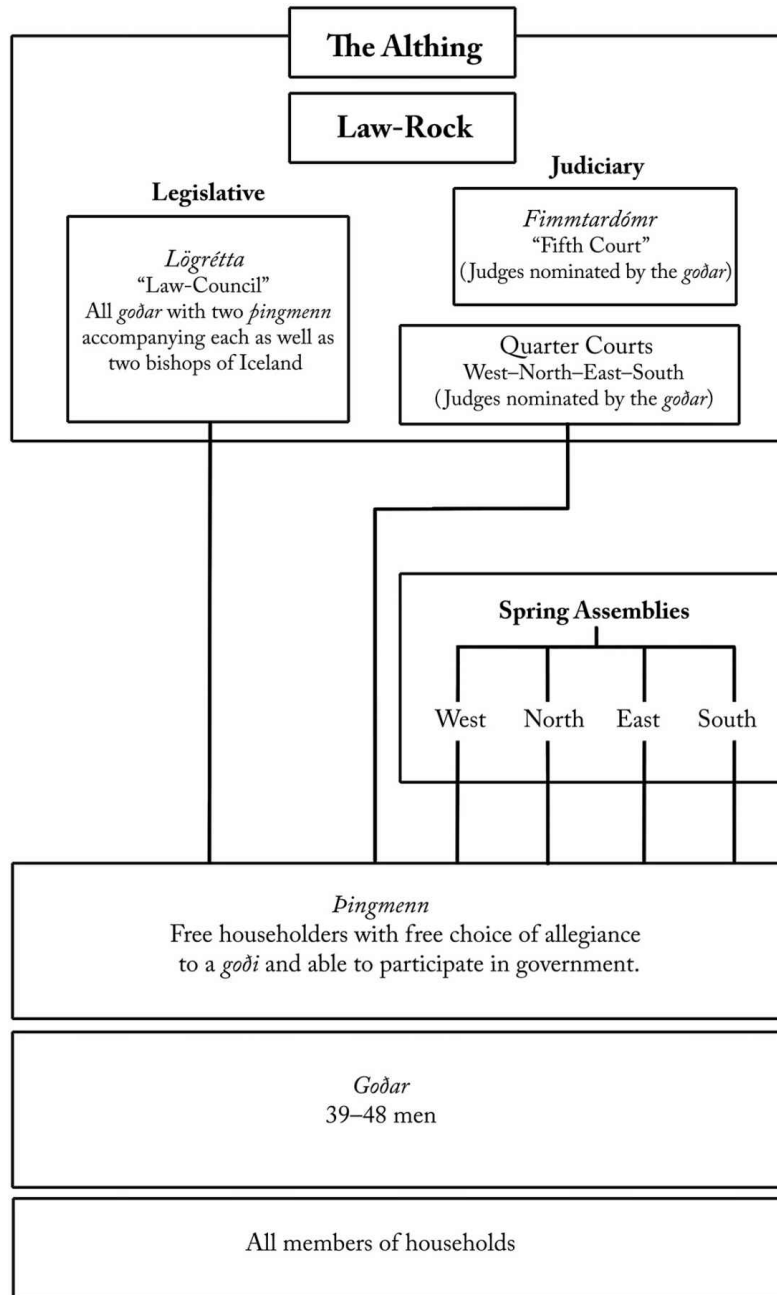


Fig. 4.10: The Medieval Icelandic Constitutional Structure

Icelandic Literature

The Icelandic settlers were deeply versed in both pre-Christian oral culture as well as literacy in Roman letters. Because of this widespread interest in the verbal arts, the inhabitants of Iceland began recording and composing vernacular works shortly after literacy had been established. Literacy itself was more widespread in Iceland than elsewhere in Europe, with the result that more individuals had the opportunity to write down lore. This created a vast sea of Icelandic literature throughout the Middle Ages. We can voyage through this immense ocean, where elsewhere we must be content to splash in a few tide pools. All medieval Icelandic literature touching on the heathen religion represents either a continuation or a revival of pre-Christian culture in some capacity.

The oldest material is poetic, and much of it goes back to pre-Christian times and to known heathen authors (e.g., Egill Skallagrímsson) or to anonymous writers as far back as the ninth century. There are two major styles of Old Icelandic poetry: Eddic and skaldic.¹²⁹ The Eddic is mythological, anonymous, and less formally restrictive, while the skaldic is personal or historical in subject matter, metrically complex, and the authors are usually known by name.

It is in the form of Eddic poetry that we find the oldest written records of Norse mythology. The most important collection of Eddic poetry survives in the famous *Codex Regius* compiled in the latter half of the thirteenth century. This compilation contains poems written over a time span of nearly four centuries, from the ninth century to a time shortly before the creation of the codex. Eddic poetry, written within the context of pre-Christian mythology (whether divine or heroic), continued to be recorded by Icelanders throughout the Middle Ages and up until the Reformation. After a short hiatus, this production resumed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the form of paper manuscripts.

There is nothing like the Eddic and skaldic poems in the history of European literature. They represent a unique continuation and even a renaissance of pre-Christian mythology within medieval Christian Iceland. From the perspective of this study, the whole question of whether or not this literature represents a true survival of paganism, or a “mere” revival of it, is relatively moot. Regardless of the answer, it seems clear that pagan myths were deployed in spiritually meaningful ways by Icelanders in the Middle Ages.

Eddic and skaldic poetry conform to a specifically Germanic verbal aesthetic. They employ alliterative verse, kennings, and—in the case of skaldic poetry—interlocking metrics reminiscent of intertwined zoomorphs in the visual arts. The preservation of these specifically Norse poetic formulas was the impetus behind Snorri Sturluson’s composition of the *Prose Edda* (1222). It should be noted that the structure of this poetry was eventually transferred to works of an overtly Christian character, for example in Christian skaldic poetry.¹³⁰

Such poetry hardly represented the whole of Germanic or Norse paganism. It reflects the bias of its creators, that is, those dedicated to poetry and verbal-symbolic modes of expression. This is why it is perhaps unsurprising that the mythology of Óðinn, a god of poetry, is the primary focus of the written record.

The sagas of Iceland are an even greater contribution to world literature than the skaldic and Eddic poems. Saga literature is vast. It covers several topical classifications: Sagas of Ancient Times, Sagas of the Icelanders (Family Sagas), Sagas of the Kings (of Norway and Denmark), Sagas of the Bishops, Fabulous Sagas, and various other types as well.¹³¹ The saga-style of prose writing is also remarkable for its almost “modern” straightforwardness. The prose is often interspersed with poetry, which is typically attributed to various historical characters in the saga.

Are the sagas fact or fiction? Debate has raged over this point for over a hundred years. It seems most reasonable to conclude that they are fictionalized accounts—historical novels, if you will—based on sparse oral lore and supplemented with fixed poetic material. Of course, all history is merely a story, an interpretation of data, selected and composed by the historian to make sense of the past for himself and his contemporaries. The historian is also most often guided by an ideology. This ideology may be personal or partisan (national, religious, political, etc.). All of this can be said of histories written in the twentieth century, and those composed in the thirteenth century are no different.

The Russian scholar M. I. Steblin-Kamenskij employs the concept of “syncretic truth” in discussing the veracity of the sagas.¹³² This is the idea that although individual historical facts may be inaccurate in the sagas and may have been invented for dramatic effect, the cultural framework, motivations of the people, and other narrative features are nevertheless historically accurate. Additionally, it is really this cultural construct, or “saga mind,” which most interests us, not whether Thorkell really killed Einarr on this rock or in that meadow.

More specifically, what draws us to the sagas are the numerous references to heathen mythology, religious practices, and other aspects of pre-Christian culture. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of such references scattered throughout the literature. These range from lengthy mythic narratives (such as the *Ynglinga Saga* at the beginning of the *Heimskringla*) and extensive descriptions of heathen temples (such as we find in the [fourth chapter](#) of the *Eyrbyggja Saga*), to the subtle use of words like *hamingja* or *gæfa* (meaning “luck”), and *ørlog* or *förlög* (meaning “fate”) in explaining the outcome of a course of events. To some extent the inevitable question of whether these references accurately reflect genuine pagan practices is offset by the focus of this study. The references are either actual remembrances of heathen practices or they are attempts to revive them in a literary form to illustrate some meaningful process in the saga—and hence in the time during which the saga was written. In fact, when we take all factors into account, it seems likely that heathen knowledge was alive and well in Iceland right up to the time of the Reformation.

Aside from the Eddic poems themselves, for our purposes the most remarkable document of the Icelandic Middle Ages is Snorri’s *Edda*, also called the *Younger* or *Prose Edda*. It is important for us on two counts. First, it is a

systematic treatment of Germanic mythology written at a time relatively close to the period when the traditional gods were openly worshipped. Second, Snorri's motive for writing the *Edda* was clearly to keep a vital part of pre-Christian culture alive. The work was written as a textbook for aspiring skalds who, by the early thirteenth century, were rapidly losing touch with the oral traditions. Therefore, a written work had to be produced to fill the void. In other words, Snorri was not merely playing an antiquarian game. He was trying to maintain a living link with his pre-Christian heritage. Like his contemporary in Denmark, Saxo Grammaticus, his motive might have been national or cultural pride. In any event, attempts to dismiss Snorri's authority on the grounds that he was a "believing Christian" are far too narrow-minded. Snorri's accounts remain almost entirely within the context of authentic Germanic mythology. Furthermore, Snorri seems far more interested in connecting his northern ancestors to the Homeric world than he does to the Bible. His classificatory system thus appears to be more influenced by classicism than Christianity.

The overall structure of the *Edda* bears examination. It consists of three (or four) parts: "Gylfaginning," "Skáldskaparmál," and "Háttatal." The "Gylfaginning," or "Beguiling of Gylfi," provides the mythological stories and characteristics of the gods and goddesses. The "Skáldskaparmál," or "Skaldic Poetics," demonstrates how to interpret and create kennings (compound metaphorical circumlocutions about the gods and other important features). The "Háttatal," or "List of Meters," demonstrates the various metrical forms. Appended to this in many manuscripts of the *Edda* is a "Grammatical Treatise."¹³³ This latter part is really a study in the representations of sound by visible signs, or letters. If we analyze the whole work from the bottom to the top, we see an ascending scale of semiotic forms: (4) sound-data in visible form, (3) arranged in aesthetically pleasing rhythms organized into larger units of (2) meaningful cross-referencing (synthesizing) complex metaphors (= kennings), which illustrate (1) the all-encompassing complex meta-narrative of the entire mythology.

Obviously, entire books could be written—and, in fact, many have—about the ways in which Icelandic literature either preserves memories of the pagan past, or revives these forms to a greater or lesser extent. But we must proceed in this study in a balanced fashion, to prevent it from becoming a work dedicated exclusively to this tangent. Repeatedly throughout this book those who wish to reawaken the culture of the Germanic past will make Icelandic literature in general, and more specifically the *Eddas*, the focal point of their interest. We will therefore have future opportunities to discuss the merits of this material.

Icelandic Religion

As in other areas, religion in medieval Iceland forms a remarkable exception to what we find elsewhere. From the time of the official adoption of Christianity through to the Reformation, and to some extent even up to today,¹³⁴ churches were privately owned and managed by "aristocratic" laymen. This socioeconomic fact is reflective of the degree to which the secular and ecclesiastic aspects of medieval Icelandic culture were interlocked—though not always peacefully. The secular interests were firmly rooted in the heathen past. The degree to which they tended to dominate in medieval Icelandic culture can be taken as an indicator of the level of authority retained by traditional institutions.

Ari Þorgilsson reported in his *Libellus Islandorum* (written between 1122 and 1133) that it was decided at the Althing that everyone should be baptized, yet certain heathen practices—which included the exposure of children and the eating of horse meat—could continue, and that people could sacrifice in secret (*blóta á laun*). Ari claims that pagan practices ceased "a few years" after 1000, and archeological finds tend to support the idea that the Icelanders adopted "some kind of Christianity" during the course of the eleventh century.¹³⁵ But because very little was done in the way of evangelizing or indoctrinating the country on any level during the first eighty or so years of nominal Christianity, a current historian has wondered aloud: "What kept the Icelanders Christian through the eleventh century remains an enigma."¹³⁶

This enigma is somewhat clarified once the unique synthesis of Christian and traditional cultural elements in Iceland is grasped. Unlike other parts of Europe, where records seem to have been manipulated to make it appear that the pagan past was instantly forgotten (which, of course, it never actually was), the Icelandic record clearly indicates the detailed continuation of heathen knowledge. The key to this enigma probably lies in the lengthy, hundred-year-long period in which any spiritual life would have still been dependent upon heathen ideas, despite nominal Christianization. This provided four to five generations of uniquely syncretic spiritual traditions. It gave rise to a culture that continued to support and value heathen mythology as a meaningful spiritual paradigm.

Another aspect of this enigma is clarified by realizing how much the church, once established, continued to propagate the same sacro-secular institutions that had existed in Iceland during the heathen period. As in the Frankish empire, the Icelandic churches were *Eigenkirchen*—churches owned by lay "aristocrats." The authority of the church was clearly subordinated to that of the secular political authorities. This pattern was especially pronounced

until the end of the thirteenth century and the *staðamál*, or “struggle over church property.” Earlier, funds had gone to the chieftains (*goðar*), who were often also priests, whereas the church itself maintained that tax revenues should be held by the bishops.¹³⁷ Once again, this clearly points to a church under the gentle domination of the traditional secular culture. This is because the priests, when not chieftains themselves, were usually members of aristocratic families. This helps explain the unique spiritual syncretism found in medieval Iceland. The pagan religion, while relegated to “unofficial” status, still resonated with the national spirit and remained an active part of the intellectual lives of Icelanders in a way that would have been unthinkable elsewhere in Europe.

The development of a secular spirituality allowed for the survival of pagan mythological symbolism in a meaningful context. By its very nature, it would syncretize Christian and classical elements—as actual traditional pagan systems do when confronted with exotic features. Also, this lay spirituality would not be dependent on formal religious institutions such as *blótar* (sacrifices) or other practices.

Toward the end of the formal pagan period there seems to have arisen a class of men who had lost faith in the sacrifices and who believed only “in their own might and main” (*á mátt sinn ok megin*).¹³⁸ In the assessment of Folke Ström, these were not atheists in the modern sense, but rather men who had come to experience the mysterious forces associated with the gods within themselves (*i deras inre jag*).¹³⁹ It is likely that a school of true philosophers would have emerged from this stream of thought had it been able to run its course. To some extent, perhaps, their spirit lived on in the secularized spirituality of the Icelandic republic.

In contrast to the lost potential for the development of a true philosophy based on indigenous intellectual structures, native elements persisted in the magical traditions of Iceland. The famous *Galdrabók*, a collection of magical spells from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, still contains numerous references to, and invocations of, the traditional pre-Christian gods and goddesses of the north.¹⁴⁰ The practice of magic and the pagan tradition remained closely linked in the Icelandic mind.

Religion in medieval Iceland was enigmatic. When looking back on this period from the perspective of post-Reformation folklore, it is interesting to note that it was sometimes said of priests that they “practiced the old heathen lore.”¹⁴¹ This was said of both figures judged to be “good men” (such as Sæmundur the Wise) and of men adjudged to be “evil” (such as Gottskálk the Cruel). This illustrates how later generations perceived people in the Middle Ages to be in possession of practical heathen lore, which was at least one conduit to special powers. Without the extensive written sources produced in Iceland from the end of the twelfth century forward, we would hardly be able to grasp the complexity inherent to the culture of the time.

Icelandic Language

The preservation of ancient ideas was much aided by the fact that the Icelandic language was (and remains) virtually unchanged from pagan times. This allowed old texts to be transcribed and read by the general populace throughout the centuries—something unthinkable elsewhere. To the seventeenth-century English speaker, *Beowulf* might as well have been written in German. But the untrained Icelander of the same time could still read the sagas and Eddas with ease. Linguistic conservatism and general cultural conservation were supported by the same three factors: (1) original national cultivation of verbal records and artistry, (2) relative isolation from the epicenters of cultural change, and (3) a long historical period of religious and cultural syncretism (ca. 1000–1100).

This linguistic continuity made cultural continuity possible. The written sources that survive from the Icelandic Middle Ages constitute an unparalleled intellectual resource for the study of Germanic antiquities. Besides recounting heathen mythology and overtly referring to heathen lore and practices (which cannot always be taken as direct testimony), they provide a living, meaningful context for a vast technical vocabulary. The groundbreaking (yet now too-often-ignored) study of Vilhelm Grønbech help demonstrate how concepts such as “luck” (*hamingja*, *gæfa*), frith (“peace”), honor (*heiðr*), and the soul actually functioned in the ideological world of the medieval Germanic peoples.¹⁴² These pre-Christian concepts were not only enshrined in the medieval Icelandic language, but they remain a part of that language today.

In contrast to the way in which the old English or medieval German language created new words by adding suffixes and prefixes onto root words, Icelandic continued to make use of the archaic mode of employing stem-vowel variations such as ablaut and umlaut to create new words. For example, the stem *rún-* “mystery,” could vary its stem vowel with rules of ablaut to yield *raun*, “test, experience,” or by umlaut the words *reyna*, “to try, to seek,” and *rýna*, “to pry into,” could be derived. This method of creating new words is less transparent than the old English or German method, but it provides for a much more compact and pithy—if often mystifying—vocabulary.

Icelandic Material Culture

Very little remains of the material culture of medieval Iceland. The one notable exception is closely linked to the language and intellectual culture of the island and consists of the parchment manuscripts of the vast medieval Icelandic literature. This body of material was systematically collected in the seventeenth century. In the periods of grinding poverty and during times of near starvation during the early modern period, people were sometimes reduced to eating the sheepskin parchments for sustenance or to using them as insulation for clothing to keep warm.

Yet by dint of their sheer number, combined with the great value that continued to be placed on them, many of the medieval manuscripts did survive. The Icelandic parchment manuscripts are examples of the dependence of ideological culture on material culture in order to survive times of neglect, ignorance, and institutional decline.

Iceland and its intellectual treasures serve as a touchstone for studies in ancient Germanic culture. It is often found that otherwise mute archeological finds can be correlated and illuminated by the contents of Icelandic literature. The frequent occurrence of this corroboration led many to an early overdependence on Icelandic evidence to fill the gaps in our knowledge concerning all Germanic antiquities—Scandinavian, Anglo-Saxon, and German. For the sake of objectivity and accuracy, this tendency must be guarded against. At the same time, one must equally guard against overrefined criticisms that tend to ignore or discount obvious connections between what is recorded in medieval Icelandic literature and the rest of Germanic culture. Because of the conservative nature of Icelandic culture, many patterns lost elsewhere were preserved more or less intact on the remote island. The conservative nature of Icelandic culture is reflected to a somewhat lesser extent in the rest of Scandinavia. Because of its relative poverty, and relative isolation from the rest of Europe, Scandinavia tended to retain cultural patterns which were being subsumed elsewhere under a tide of first Christianizing and, subsequently, modernizing influences.

The Sun at Midnight

As I conclude this chapter on the Middle Ages, it is worth remembering that the vast thousand-year period is marked by the general cultural and intellectual hegemony of Christianity, which came not as a flood, but as a creeping tide over Europe. The medieval epoch, usually seen as the zenith of the power of Christianity in Europe, can only be understood once we realize the extent to which Christianity was forced to accommodate the political, economic, mythological, and material national traditions of Europe. When we liberate ourselves from the narrow “either/or” view of paganism and Christianization, and look at culture in a broader, more holistic fashion, the Middle Ages take on a very different character.

Modern revivalists of the old Germanic religion often criticize Snorri, and especially Saxo, for their Christian perspective, which is deemed “untrustworthy.” But the modern person has absorbed so many truly Christian ideas (albeit in secularized forms) that it is often the case that Saxo, in trying to be a Christian, exudes more paganism than the modernist who is “trying to be a pagan.” The difference hinges on the factor of consciousness. Snorri or Saxo might have held largely heathen values, but thought of themselves as Christians. The modern revivalist may hold mostly Christian values, while thinking of himself as “pagan.” The point here is that the lines demarcating these categories in culture are by no means clear—in the past or in the present.

One thing, however, is clear: throughout the medieval period there was a growing ignorance concerning the national cultural traditions among all of the Germanic peoples. Traditions increasingly descended into folklore under constant subtle or overt pressures to Christianize their forms. This is illustrated by the record of magical incantations. In their oldest recorded versions, these formulas called on the traditional divinities, but as time went on they were replaced with figures from Christian mythology. Their magical intent remains the same, but the names have been changed.

When we look at our three cultural spheres during the Middle Ages, a curious, two-tiered pattern emerges. In the southern Germanic territory there was a tendency toward Latinization or Romanization. A *translatio Romana* took place in which continental Germania was subjectively transformed into the image of the Roman Empire. Mythically, Germania had *become* Rome. A similar yet cruder Latinization was effected over England following the Norman Conquest of 1066. By contrast, the northern reaches of Germania—the Scandinavian region—remained free of this Latinizing tendency. These subtle distinctions account for profound historical and cultural differences between Scandinavia and the rest of Germania.

By the end of the Middle Ages (around 1500) the cultural Christianization process had been sufficiently advanced so that the vast majority of Europeans of all social strata might be said to be Christian. This “midnight” of the 1,000-year medieval nocturne represents the sun at its nadir, the midnight sun that now makes its way toward the Northern Dawn. In the next volume, we will be able to address the idea of reawakening in an unambiguous fashion. Up until this point, our history has dealt with the preservation, or maintenance, of officially rejected forms. Next we will consider the revival of forgotten ones.

1. The Renaissance can just as easily be seen as the final phase of the Middle Ages; cf. Dannenfeldt, *The Renaissance*.
2. The theory of cultural continuity has been most profoundly expressed by Otto Höfler, while perhaps the most persistent critic of the theory has been Klaus von See (see, e.g., his *Kontinuitätstheorie und Sakraltheorie in der Germanenforschung*).
3. Russell, *The Germanization*, 20.
4. Russell, *The Germanization*, 20–21.
5. Russell, *The Germanization*, 6.
6. Russell, *The Germanization*, 41.
7. Russell, *The Germanization*, 42.
8. Russell, *The Germanization*, 7.
9. Russell, *The Germanization*, 23.
10. Russell, *The Germanization*, 121.
11. This idea of continuity of Gothic identity is discussed in some detail in Heather, *The Goths*, 299–309.
12. Theodor's legal code encouraged a religious and hence ethnic separation of Goths and Romans; see Burns, *A History of the Ostrogoths*, 173 et passim.
13. Reinhardt, *Germany*, I, 74.
14. An edition of the original Latin can be found in MGH, *Script. Auct. ant.* 5, 1. For an English version, see Mierow, trans., *The Gothic History of Jordanes*.
15. This "apologetic" quote from Jordanes (LX, 316) somehow does not ring true when compared to the tone of the rest of his work.
16. Burns, *A History of the Ostrogoths*, 144.
17. In one degree or another this is indicated by Burns (*A History of the Ostrogoths*, 143–62), Wolfram (*History of the Goths*, 106–12), and Heather (*The Goths*, 299–321).
18. Helm, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, II:1, 18–19.
19. Helm, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, II:1, 15–20.
20. Helm, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, II:1, 21.
21. Heather (*The Goths*, 312) points out the ritual significance of these brooches or fibulae, and the fact that they were probably gifts given by royalty to select tribal members, or as a way of including previously non-tribal members into the tribe.
22. Heather (*The Goths*, 311–12) jumps to this interpretation, although it is likely that the eagle had been important in Germanic mythic symbolism from an earlier date.
23. The eagle figures prominently in the mythic iconography of the Germanic peoples; see, e.g., the story of Óðinn transforming himself into an eagle (ON *örn*) in order to transport the poetic mead from the realm of the giants to Ásgarðr (*Edda*, "Skáldskaparmál," chap. 58). In this regard, note too that one of the *heiti* (bynames) of Óðinn is *Arnhöfði* ("eagle-head"). The eagle also appears as a player in the cosmological scheme of the ancient Norse: cf. Hræsvelgr ("Vafþrúðnismál," st. 37), who sits at the northern end of the cosmos and creates wind by beating his wings, and also the eagle at the apex of the world-tree, Yggdrasil (*Edda*, "Gylfaginning," chap. 16). The image of what is most likely an eagle appears on several Gotlandic picture stones (see Lindqvist, *Gotlands Bildsteine*). Sometimes the eagle is difficult to differentiate from other "birds of prey" in the pictorial iconography.
24. For a description of these crowns (which were discovered in the mid-nineteenth century and were held in France for many years before being returned to Spain), see Amador de los Rios, *El arte latino-bizantino en España y las coronas visigodas de Guarrazar*.
25. For an interesting discussion of this, see Svennung, *Zur Geschichte des Gotizismus*, 34–43.
26. See a presentation of this by Drew, *The Laws of the Salian Franks*, 29.
27. Drew, *The Laws of the Salian Franks*, 31.
28. Drew, *The Laws of the Salian Franks*, 33.
29. Trans. Thorpe, in Einhard and Notker, *Two Lives of Charlemagne*, 82.
30. Dixon, *Barbarian Europe*, 24–25, reproduces a drawing of the treasure published in 1655; see also Holmqvist, *Germanic Art during the First Millennium A.D.*, plate XVI.
31. This point is emphasized by Russell, *The Germanization*, 41.
32. An extensive history and other data about the Vehme are provided in a sober and objective manner in Lindner, *Die Veme*.
33. This is discussed in some detail in Kaltenstadler, *Das Haberbeldtreiben*.
34. For the text of the *Muspilli*, see Braune-Ebbinghaus, *Althochdeutsches Lesebuch*, 86–89. Its mythic components are discussed in Vries, *AR*, II, 392–94.
35. For a translation of the work, see Murphy, *The Heliand*; for further background, see also his study entitled *The Saxon Savior*. A selection of excerpts in the original Old Saxon with commentary in English is Cathey, ed., *Heliand*.
36. This is the assessment of Murphy, *The Heliand*, xiii.
37. Vilmar's work, *Deutsche Altertümer im Heliand als Einkleidung der evangelischen Geschichte*, was published in 1862. It is now greatly dated, of course, and has been superseded by the studies of Murphy and others.
38. Murphy, *The Saxon Savior*, ix.
39. Murphy, *The Saxon Savior*, 33–53.
40. Murphy, *The Saxon Savior*, 68–72.
41. Murphy, *The Saxon Savior*, 75–93.
42. Murphy, *The Saxon Savior*, 90.
43. The Middle High German text is most conveniently available in Boor, ed., *Das Nibelungenlied*. For an English version, see Hatto, trans., *The Nibelungenlied*.
44. For an insightful study of some vestiges of the ancient Germanic gods in the heroic Nibelungen legends, see Moynihan, "Divine Traces in the Nibelungenlied."
45. For an extensive review of all aspects of the Nibelungen legend and its reception throughout the history of Germanic culture and literature, see Gentry, et al., eds., *The Nibelungen Tradition*.
46. The *Þiðreks saga* was first edited by C. R. Unger in 1853. An English translation by Haymes, *The Saga of Thidrek of Bern*, is unfortunately difficult to obtain.
47. On the etymology of the name Attila, Maenchen-Helfen (*The World of the Huns*, 386) says: "Attila is formed from the Gothic or Gepidic *atta*, 'father,' by means of the diminutive suffix *-ila*."
48. Borchardt's important book *German Antiquity in Renaissance Myth* presents a systematic study of the literature of myth in the German renaissance period relating to Germanic antiquities.
49. Borchardt, *German Antiquity*, 225.
50. Borchardt, *German Antiquity*, 226.
51. Borchardt, *German Antiquity*, 150.

52. For the Old High German text of the *Second Merseburger Charm*, see Braune-Ebbinghaus, *Althochdeutsches Lesebuch*, 89, and also the translation given in Flowers, *The Galdrabók*, 81.
53. See Flowers, *The Galdrabók*, 81–82.
54. This passage by Erdmann (*The Origin of the Idea of Crusade*, 19–20) is quoted more fully by Russell (*The Germanization*, 167–68), who also discusses this idea in greater detail.
55. Erdmann, *The Origin*, 19–20.
56. For a general introduction, see Barber, *The Knight and Chivalry*, 297–317, and for more details about the *Rule* and organization of the order, see Miltzer, *Von Akkon zur Marienburg*.
57. Magee, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition*, 35.
58. For a discussion of this aspect of the reception of the Teutonic Knights, see Burleigh, “The German Knights,” 24–29.
59. Beck, *Early German Philosophy*, 44–45.
60. For general information on the Brethren and similar sects, see Norman Cohn’s important study *In Pursuit of the Millennium*.
61. Magee, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition*, 25.
62. Blakney, *Meister Eckhart*, 163.
63. This is mentioned by Blakney (*Meister Eckhart*, xx) and suggests the deep cultural link between Eckhart’s theology and that of his ancient Germanic ancestors.
64. Magee, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition*, 27.
65. For interesting discussions on the theories concerning the origin of the tradition of *Minnesang*, see Erckmann, “Der Einfluß der arabisch-spanischen Kultur auf die Entwicklung des Minnesangs,” and Denomy, *The Heresy of Courtly Love*.
66. The Middle High German text of Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival* is conveniently edited by Gottfried Weber. An English edition is Mustard and Passage, trans., *Parzival*.
67. Blakney, *Meister Eckhart*, x.
68. A general survey of the weekday names in the Germanic languages was early on offered by Jacob Grimm; see his *Teutonic Mythology*, I, 122–30.
69. For some interesting ideas on the term “Gothic” as applied to this architectural style, see Reinhardt, *Germany*, I, 148.
70. Ploss (*Siegfried-Sigurd*, 110) cites the role of Scandinavian artisans working in the stone of Gothic structures in Spain, where they even included images from the Sigurd-saga, reminiscent of the wooden images found on the stave church of Hylestad, Norway (see Holmqvist, *Germanic Art*, plate LXII).
71. Lamm and Cross, *The Humanities in Western Culture*, I, 392.
72. Reinhardt, *Germany*, I, 148.
73. *B-T*, 195.
74. This concept of ordeal and its larger context is outlined in the groundbreaking work of Paul Bauschatz (*The Well and the Tree*, 59–61 et passim, and notes).
75. *B-T*, 682.
76. *B-T*, 527.
77. For specific data on Anglo-Saxon kingship, see Chaney, *The Cult of Kingship*, 174–220, and for more general data on Germanic sacral kingship, see Höfler, *Der Runenstein von Rok*.
78. These genealogies are conveniently collected and presented by Jacob Grimm; see his *Teutonic Mythology*, IV, 1709–36.
79. Chaney, *The Cult of Kingship*, 185–86.
80. Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Prose*, 187–201.
81. Chaney, *The Cult of Kingship*, 257–59.
82. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 502–25.
83. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 685–87.
84. For a complete edition of the recorded of Anglo-Saxon poetry, see the six-volume series edited by Krapp and Dobbie, *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*. Prose translations of a good number of these texts along with a complete catalog are presented in Bradley, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*. Old English prose works are much more various in their contents than the poetic records. For a convenient survey of these texts in translation, see Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Prose*.
85. *Beowulf* is best presented by Friedrich Klaeber (4th edition, 2008, edited by Fulk, Bjork, and Niles) with extensive notes and background material. This poem is among the most often translated works in any language. Perhaps the handiest prose translation is that of David Wright (1957).
86. For a summary of the various cross-traditional strands to be found within the text of *Beowulf*, see Garmonsway and Simpson, *Beowulf and its Analogues*.
87. Convenient translations of these and other Old English poetic texts can be found in Bradley, ed., *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, and Alexander, ed., *The Earliest English Poems*.
88. See Bede, *History of the English Church and People*, 55–57.
89. This quote is from Leon Poliakov’s polemic *The Aryan Myth* (p. 42), which contains many interesting facts and presentations.
90. For a general treatment of these historical curiosities, see Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right*.
91. For the text and translation of this charm, see Storms, *Anglo-Saxon Magic*, 186–97, and another translation in Flowers, *The Galdrabók*, 77–79.
92. Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, IV, 1709–36.
93. This manuscript is MS Liège University Library (396 C1). It is extensively discussed in D’Ardenne, “A Neglected Manuscript of British History.”
94. The phenomenon of light issuing from the mouth occurs three times in *Havelok* (ll. 592–95, 1252–57, and 2122–23). Lines 592–93 read: “Of his moup it stood a stem / Als it were a sunnebeem.” A convenient edition of *Havelok* appears in Herzman, et al., eds., *Four Romances of England*. This issuance of light can also be seen in the iconography of bracteates manufactured from between 450 and 550 CE, for example on the bracteate of Sievern (KJ 134); cf. Hauck, *Goldbrakteaten aus Sievern*, and see also n. 93 above.
95. Jung’s 1922 study is perhaps the most comprehensive single presentation of this subject. The situation in Europe in the Middle Ages can be compared to the “cult of the saints” in Afro-Caribbean syncretic religions of today which preserve remnants of indigenous religions masked by Christian iconography after about three hundred years of ostensible Christianization. The principles at work in any transition from any one “religion” to another are similar for all cultures and time periods. To suppose otherwise would be tantamount to pleading a “special case” for the history of Europe.
96. This is reported by Bede, *History of the English Church*, III, 9–13 (pp. 155–63 in the translation by Sherley-Price).
97. With regard to horse-healing, compare the Old High German *Second Merseburg Charm*, in which Wodan cures a horse’s injured leg; with regard to fire, compare “Hávamál” st. 152, in which Óðinn stops fire with runes.
98. Quoted in Jung, *Germanische Götter und Helden in christlicher Zeit*, 115.
99. This is reproduced in Jung, *Germanische Götter und Helden*, 117.
100. These are more fully discussed by Chaney, *The Cult of Kingship*, 186–89.
101. Chaney, *The Cult of Kingship*, 189.
102. Mitchell and Robinson, *A Guide to Old English*, 57–60.

103. This is the subject of an entire book by Björkman, *Scandinavian Loan-Words in Middle English*; cf. also Geipel, *The Viking Legacy*.
104. These are discussed by Björkman, *Scandinavian Loan-Words*, 180.
105. For a study of this weapon and its archaeological importance, see Davidson, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England*.
106. See Kendrick, *Anglo-Saxon Art to A.D. 900*, and Fischer, *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon Architecture and Sculpture*, for fuller discussions and presentations of examples of this artistic style.
107. Nordenfalk, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Painting*, 26.
108. See the article on the *hirð* by Sverre Bagge in Pulsiano, ed., *Medieval Scandinavia*, and the bibliography found there.
109. The most standard edition of the corpus of the earliest runic inscriptions that make use of the older runic *futhorc* is Krause-Jankuhn, *Die Runeninschriften im älteren Futhark*.
110. This cultural context is noted and explored in some detail in Sawyer, *The Viking-Age Rune-Stones*, 124–45. It is fascinating to note how many stones that were set up under women's sponsorship commemorate the building of "bridges." These are not usually bridges in the normal sense but rather solidifications of roads across swampy areas. Although they are Christian in their overt content, there may be an echo of the idea of the role of the female (*valkyrja*) as one who welcomes the soul of the departed as it crosses the (Bifröst) bridge between heaven (Valhöll) and earth. This seems to reflect archaic Indo-European beliefs, as in Iranian ideas concerning the Činvat Bridge.
111. A selection of these poetic runic texts is presented in Jansson, *Runes in Sweden*, 131–43.
112. See Sawyer, *The Viking-Age Rune-Stones*, 27, and Jansson, *Runes in Sweden*, 63.
113. See Bredsdorff, *Introduction to Scandinavian Literature*, 24.
114. These voluminous ballads have been collected in printed editions for scholars beginning with Grundtvig, *Danmarks gamle folkeviser*.
115. For more on this custom, see Bredsdorff, *Introduction to Scandinavian Literature*, 26–27.
116. Grundtvig, *Danmarks gamle folkeviser*, I, 3.
117. Among the most convenient translations of these folktales are those of Reidar Christiansen (*Folktales of Norway*) for Norway, John Lindow (*Swedish Legends and Folktales*) for Sweden, and an anthology from different countries by Simpson (*The Penguin Book of Scandinavian Folktales*).
118. Bredsdorff, *Introduction to Scandinavian Literature*, 23. Even in the idea of focusing on the king as a symbol of the nation, Saxo seems to be recalling ancient Germanic sacro-political theories that will perhaps play a hidden role in the political theories which will (re-)emerge in the Reformation.
119. See Toyne, *The Scandinavians in History*, 49. For a more general discussion of this kind of syncretism, see Vries, *AR*, I, 456–57, 473–74.
120. For a convenient survey of the various rites and celebrations conducted in Scandinavia during the course of human life, see Wikman, *Livets Högtider*.
121. This is the subject of Celander's study "Oskoreien och besläktade föreställningar i äldre och nyare nordisk tradition."
122. See Christiansen, *Folktales of Norway*, 91–92.
123. See Strömbäck, "The Concept of the Soul in Nordic Tradition," and Alver, "Concepts of the Soul in Norwegian Tradition."
124. Lindqvist, *En isländsk Svarthkonstbok från 1500-talet (Galdrabók)*, 70–71.
125. For a fascinating study of these unfortunate individuals and their nefarious activities, see Moynihan and Söderlind, *Lords of Chaos*, esp. 81–108.
126. This legality is noted and discussed in Briem, *Hedinn Siður á Íslandi*, 71.
127. See the examples cited in Ploss, *Siegfried-Sigurd*, 110.
128. See Krause-Jankuhn, *Die Runeninschriften*, 146–47.
129. For a convenient survey of this material, see Hallberg, *Old Icelandic Poetry*.
130. The most important of these poems is the *Sólarljóð*; see Hallberg, *Old Icelandic Poetry*, 173–77.
131. For a general survey of the types of sagas found in the corpus of Icelandic literature, see *C-V*, ix–xii, and Schier, *Sagaliteratur*.
132. This interesting concept is outlined in his work *The Saga Mind*. The concept of "syncretic truth" is a general one, and not by any means limited to the study of Icelandic literature.
133. For a translation and edition of this text, see Hreinn Benediktsson, ed., *The First Grammatical Treatise*.
134. See Karlsson, *The History of Iceland*, 99.
135. Karlsson, *The History of Iceland*, 35.
136. Karlsson, *The History of Iceland*, 38.
137. Karlsson, *The History of Iceland*, 96–99.
138. This whole cultural phenomenon is studied in Ström, *Den egna Kraftens män*.
139. Ström, *Den egna Kraftens män*, 76.
140. This text was first edited in 1921 by Lindqvist, *En isländsk Svarthkonstbok*, and translated with additional material in Flowers, *The Galdrabók*, 40–76.
141. Icelandic: *vóru margarfróðar og fóru með forneskju*, said of the sisters of the priest Sæmundur the Wise (see Árnason, *Íslenzkar Þjóðsögur og Ævintýri*, I, 494). Numerous further examples are cited in Simpson, *Legends of Icelandic Magicians*.
142. See Grønbech's masterpiece *The Culture of the Teutons*, which is more than a translation of the original Danish work; it is a new English-language edition.

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